

The Flaw is Not the Law

Romans 7:7-12

January 14, 2018

Introduction:

Last month our family had the opportunity to take a vacation down in Florida which meant that rather than driving forever, we booked flights, flying non-stop out of Cedar Rapids to Orlando and back. Now I don't have the kind of job that requires me to travel and most vacations I take involve me driving, so flying on an airplane is still a novelty. And as I sit at the terminal looking out the window at the airplane, it never ceases to amaze me that this huge machine weighing hundreds of tons can safely transport me within a mere three hours over a thousand miles by flying in the air at an altitude of over 25,000 feet. And to think this amazing feat of engineering happens all the time. I did a little research and learned that there are on average approximately 100,000 flights a day across the globe.

Needless to say, modern air travel is an amazing benefit to all of us, allowing us to travel safely, quickly, and affordably to just about anywhere in the world. Yet as incredible as the physics are that allow these steel behemoths to fly and as beneficial as airplanes are to us both personally and commercially, on September 11, 2001 we all viewed airplanes quite differently. We saw airplanes flown into buildings, used by terrorists as explosive missiles to carry out the slaughter of thousands of innocent people. By mid-morning of that fateful day, every plane in the sky was viewed with fearful suspicion, as we were unsure whether a plane was legitimately attempting to get to its destination or had been hijacked and was being aimed at another American landmark.

Yet in spite of the horrors that had transpired on 9/11, once the air travel ban was lifted and flights began to resume, people got back on airplanes. They didn't conclude that just because terrorists had used airplanes for destructive ends that therefore all airplanes were bad. Airplanes were, and still are, good things. Just because they were used for evil ends did not delegitimize them.

Well, the same thing can be said to be true of God's Law. Even though the law might be used for sinful ends, it doesn't make the law sinful. Good things used for evil purposes don't cause those good things to suddenly become bad. The events of 9/11 didn't make us conclude, "Airplanes are evil" and neither should the misuse of the law lead us to think that God's law is bad.

So let's see how the apostle Paul deals with this issue by opening your Bibles to Romans 7, which is on pg. 943 of the pew Bibles. As Paul has done a number of times already in Romans, he's going to raise an objection in the form of a question, answer it, and then explain it. So let's take a look at what he has to say as I read v. 7-12 of Romans 7. Please follow along as I read. **"What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the**

law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”

So as you can see from v. 7, our passage today is all about answering this one question: Is the law sin? Paul is continuing to anticipate objections to what he’s teaching by bringing up conclusions people have mistakenly come to as a result of his preaching. In this case, the trigger for this question comes from what he said regarding the law back in v. 5. Look back at Romans 7:5 for a moment. Paul says, *“For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.”* You can see how the objection then could be made as such: “If the law arouses sin, then the law itself is a source of sin and therefore the law is sinful.” Paul would certainly find himself in hot water with Jewish believers if he indeed thought this, but as you saw from what we read, that’s not at all the case. So then, let’s examine this passage more closely together and see what we can learn. Our main question Paul is answering then is this...

Is the law sin?

To answer that, I think we can discern three reasons why Paul doesn’t think such a conclusion is warranted. So for our first point, in answering the question **Is the law sin?** Paul replies...

1. No, rather the law helps us see sin for what it is (v. 7)

As with the other questions he asked throughout Romans, Paul raises the question in v. 7 about whether we would regard the law as sinful and then immediately strongly denies it, saying **“By no means!”** He then proceeds to give a reason why such a notion is incorrect. Look at the second half of v. 7. He says, **“Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’”**

Now this is not to say that before the law was given people didn’t have any sense of right and wrong. Paul made it clear back in chapter two that even the pagan Gentiles who never heard of the law of Moses still had the law written in their hearts and knew intuitively that certain things were morally wrong. But it’s one thing to have a vague sense of guilt over something you’ve done but quite another to recognize it as an offense against the revealed will of God.

For example, when I was a kid I purposely knocked down a snow fort that a neighbor of mine had made, simply to be mean. I knew it was wrong to do, yet my parents had never told me, “Don’t destroy other people’s snow forts.” But had they expressly told me that, then my sin would be far worse: it would be a transgression of their explicit command prohibiting me from my small act of domestic terrorism. So then, what the law does is it makes abundantly clear what might otherwise be vague and uncertain. The law spells out for us in no uncertain terms what exactly constitutes sin.

Paul then uses an example from the Ten Commandments regarding coveting. He says, **“I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’”** Coveting doesn’t seem to be such a terrible thing on the surface, right? So your neighbor has a new Lexus and you’re wishing you had one of your own. What’s so bad about that? Or maybe a co-worker got that promotion with a raise and a new title and you’re thinking to yourself, “Why him and not me? I work just as hard as he does. I deserve that promotion just as much, if not more, than him.” We might think that such thoughts are just us being ambitious. No big deal, right? It’s good to want to better ourselves, isn’t it?

But as soon as you hear God’s Word say, “You shall not covet,” the gig is up! You can’t plead ignorance anymore. If God has explicitly commanded you to not covet, whether that’s somebody else’s car or house or spouse or job or money or reputation or health, then as soon as you do so it’s crystal clear that you have sinned because God’s Word has clearly identified it as such. So then, rather than allowing us to excuse our behavior, the law grants us a clear and unambiguous awareness that our behavior was in fact a sin against God.

Since the law reveals sin for what it is, it’s hardly right to label the law as sin. Think of the law like a mirror. A mirror reveals what you look like, right? It makes clear for you to see how you appear to others. But it’s not the mirror’s fault if it reveals that you’re overweight. You can hardly accuse it of causing your bad complexion. All those gray hairs you see in the mirror were not given to you by the mirror. The mirror only shows you what is already there and makes the truth about you, no matter how unpleasant it might be, readily apparent. So also, the law only reveals what’s already there. Your thoughts, words, and deeds were already sinful, even if you couldn’t see them as such previously. But now the mirror of the law allows you to recognize that those things you did were in fact a sin against God’s commandments.

As I’ve said in past sermons, the purpose of the law is S.O.S. to Show Our Sins. Its purpose was always to make it clear how short we’ve fallen from the holiness God demands of us so that the gospel could S.O.S., Show Our Savior. So we can hardly fault the law for doing what it was always intended to do: make clear what God’s will is for us and thereby reveal just how far short we’ve come from obeying him.

But there more to law than merely a neutral mirror that reveals our true sinful nature. Our sin in turn takes the law and uses it for its own nefarious purposes. So moving on now to the second answer Paul gives to the question **Is the law sin?** he says this...

2. **No, rather sin uses the law to stir up sinful desires (v. 8-11)**

Let’s start with just that very first sentence in v. 8. Look there with me. **“But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.”** And then skip ahead to v. 11 because it basically restates the same idea. **“For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.”**

Both these verses describe sin **“Seizing an opportunity through the commandment”** which lead to destructive results. What does Paul mean by this? I think an illustration can help us. Let’s say it’s the weekend and you have some middle school kids at home and you decide to go make a quick shopping trip over to Hy-Vee. Before you leave, you give instructions to your kids and tell them, “I’ll be back in 30 minutes and then we’ll eat lunch. Do not snack on anything while I’m gone, especially the cookies.” Perhaps the kids were wrapped up in watching television or playing a video game at the moment you give those instruction, but suddenly, their thoughts are divided. Whereas before they weren’t thinking about those cookies sitting quietly in the cookie jar, suddenly they hear them calling out, “Pssss... hey, come over here. If you sneak just one of me out, mom will never notice. And do you remember how good I taste? Plus, thirty minutes is soooooo long to wait. Better to tide yourself over just in case mom is late getting back.”

Isn’t that how it often works? You might be just fine without something, with little if any desire for it, but as soon as you’re commanded *not* to have it, it suddenly becomes desirable. The command provokes you to want it in disobedience to the commandment. As they say, it is the forbidden fruit that tastes the sweetest.

St. Augustine has a classic analysis of this in his *Confessions*. He recounts this event,

“Near our vineyard there was a pear tree, loaded with fruit, though the fruit was not particularly attractive either in color or taste. I and some other youths... conceived the idea of shaking the pears off this tree and carrying them away. We set out at late at night... and stole all the fruit we could carry. And this was not to feed ourselves; we may have tasted a few, but then we threw the rest to the pigs. Our real pleasure was in simply doing something that was not allowed. I had plenty of better pears of my own; I only took these in order that I might be a thief. Once I had taken them I threw them away, and all I tasted in them was my own iniquity, which I enjoyed very much.”¹

The forbidden nature of the act not only revealed the sinfulness of the heart but actually created new sinful desires. Any commandment that limits us in any way reminds us that we aren’t God, that we are not the sovereign master of our own universe. The law is an infringement on our sovereignty. We want to be God. We want to live by our own rules. Who does God or anyone else think they are to tell me what I should or shouldn’t do? So then, since the law reminds us that we aren’t God, our sinful hearts want to rebel against it, because to submit to it is to admit the truth that God is in authority over us.

Can you see this in your own life? I know I can. I want to do what I want. I don’t like rules telling me to do this or not do that. In my sinfulness, I’m a rebel at heart. And so is the apostle Paul and so are all of us. Thus what is happening with the law is that while the commands of the law are good, we twist it into an infringement upon our freedom and so we find new desires to sin being produced in us as a result. Thus the commandment not to covet is good, but as Paul says in v. 8, my sinful heart takes it and twists it into producing even more covetousness. Instead of leading us to obey, the law stirs up in our hearts an ever-increasing desire to rebel.

Now that I think is clear enough but the middle section between v. 8 and v. 11 is a bit more challenging. Look back in your Bibles now at the last sentence of v. 8 through v. 10. Paul says, **“For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.”**

There is significant difficulty in understanding exactly what Paul means here when he says that he was once **“alive apart from the law”** but that when the commandment came, **“sin came alive and I died.”** Clearly it is not referring to physical life or death, but it doesn't seem to refer to spiritual life and death either. To say that he was once spiritually **“alive apart from the law”** doesn't jive with what Paul says elsewhere about us being spiritually dead in sin. I'm not going to bore you with all the details of the various possible interpretations Bible scholars have come up with in this regard and instead I'm going to take the approach that I think makes the most sense of these verses, humbly recognizing that this isn't an interpretive hill I want to die on.

I think the best approach here is to understand Paul as looking back on his life before he was a Christian. As a Pharisee, he was **“alive apart from the law”** not in that he was unaware of the law - quite the contrary, as a Jewish boy he would have been instructed in it at an early age - but rather in that he didn't fully grasp the law's true demands upon him. He was alive such that he thought he was doing well in obeying the law. He saw in his obedience to the letter of the law spiritual success, life in the sense that God accepted him and would reward him for his strict obedience. His sin didn't look like sin because he kept the externals of the law such that he considered himself to be righteous in word and deed.

It's would be like a person who thinks everything is fine between him and God because he doesn't lie, cheat, steal, swear, or cheat on his spouse, among other vices he avoids. He thinks he's spiritually alive because measured by the externals of his life, he's in the zone. But the problem is that is true nature of the law isn't merely the externals. Jesus helped us see this when on the Sermon on the Mount he said the commandment, “You shall not murder” included not just stabbing and shooting people but calling them a fool. “You shall not commit adultery” was not just a prohibition on physical unions but it also includes the lustful desires of your heart, such that even to look upon a woman lustfully was to break the commandment.

So then, once you see beyond the mere externals of the law and get to the heart of the matter of how deep the prohibition against sin goes, even down to the thoughts and motivations of our hearts, then the commandment truly came to be understood rightly. So as Paul says at the end of v. 9, **“when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.”** Suddenly all his confidence in his own self-righteous was shattered by the realization of just how dreadfully short he actually fell. The caricature of the law he once had as a Pharisee deceived him into thinking he was alive to God but once he knew the actual meaning of the law and how deep the commandment went in it's expectation of obedience, Paul **“died”** in that he finally came to the realization of how desperate his spiritual condition actually was.

Thus what Paul is saying here is in a sense what we all need to experience in order to see our need for Christ. We may think ourselves to be alive because we don't do all those bad things those other people do, and we can pat ourselves on the back for all the good and charitable deeds we do, but once we see our sin for what it is by seeing how demanding the law of God really is, we can't rest comfortable and secure any longer. We need the law to show us that the ugly truth about us is we're moral failures. We've need to come to recognize that we aren't righteous, that God isn't pleased with us because our sin extends far deeper than mere externals, and that therefore we are in fact spiritually dead, lost and hopeless and can't save ourselves by our own efforts.

So then, the law doesn't help us in that it gives us confidence that's we're right on track; instead it shows us just how far short we're fallen and furthermore it stimulates our sin to gravitate toward even more sin. It's not the law's fault that we are like we are: all it does is reflect back to us what is already there and then is used by us to rebel against it in order to commit even more sin. Therefore, we now come to our third and final answer to the question of whether the law is sin, where Paul answers in v. 12...

3. **No, rather the law is holy, righteous, and good (v. 12)**

Let's take a look briefly at v. 12 in your Bibles. Paul gives his final answer on the question of the law by saying this, **“So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”** Since the law comes from God, it is a good thing. It reflects God's holy and righteous character. There's no fault to be found in it because when God tells us what he expects of us, he is giving us truth about himself and what we need to do to live a life pleasing to him.

So the flaw is not the law: it's in us. Like a terrorist who uses a good thing like an airplane as a weapon of mass destruction, so also our wicked and deceitful hearts take God's good and holy commandments and misuse them as a way of inciting us to more sin. God's no more responsible for our perverted misuse of the law than United Airlines was manufacturing airplanes that were used for evil ends. The responsibility for sinful desires being stirred up by the law falls squarely on our sinful shoulders.

Therefore, any such conclusion that would imagine Paul regards the law as something negative - much less something sinful - is well out of line! Paul absolutely upholds the goodness of God's law: the deficiency in goodness is in those who would use the holy commandments of God to wicked ends.

Conclusion

Oh the deceptiveness of our sinful hearts! How we can so easily take good things and twist them for evil purposes. So then, let's learn from Paul's instruction here to first always keep in high regard the commandments of God. Never look down our God's Word because it shows you your sin for what it is: we need to see it, in all of it's ugliness. Without it, we will remain self-deceived, confident the externals of our own self-righteousness, blind to how we can be nothing more than white-washed tombs: appearing clean on the outside while inside we're full of the rotten stench of the decay of sin. The law of God shows us just how bad we

are and therefore just how desperately we need a Savior to save us from ourselves. What the law shows us may not be pretty, but it's necessary if we're ever going to come to Jesus.

Second, let the insights of this passage help you better understand and guard your own heart. God's commandments remind us that we aren't God: we don't make the rules. But we want to. We want to be the master and commander of our own lives. So when we hear the law we want to break the law because we want to be a law unto ourselves. So guard your heart in recognizing how the good commands of God can be misused into creating ever more desire to sin. Instead, come to God's good and holy commands with a sense of profound humility: willing to submit to them and thankful that though you have failed to keep them time and time again, you have a perfect advocate, the Lord Jesus Christ, who obeyed the law in your place and gave you his righteousness by grace, through faith.

Let's go to him now in prayer. Please bow your heads with me.

Endnotes

Keller, Timothy. Romans 1-7 For You. The Good Book Company: USA, 2014.