

IS GOD'S LAW THE PROBLEM?

Romans 7:7-12

For several years prior to 2008 I suffered considerable pain in my right hip. After doing the “man” thing and refusing to see a doctor, the pain hit such a level that I finally gave in. My primary doctor referred me to an orthopaedic specialist named Rodney Henderson. He had an x-ray machine in his office and on my second visit x-rayed my right hip. In just minutes the film was developed. He showed me the film and it was obvious what my problem was. There was no space between the head of my femur and the socket of my hip; it was bone on bone. I was 47. Because my bones were healthy, Dr. Henderson did a procedure in which he installed a metal socket in my hip and a metal cap for my femur. It's been ten years; so far so good.

A critical component in this process was the xray machine. It enabled us to identify the problem. The xray machine did a good thing. But the xray machine could not solve the problem. It would be unreasonable to criticize the xray machine because it could not solve the problem.

God's Law is like the xray machine. It reveals problem areas in our lives, but it cannot solve our problem. In Romans 7 Paul teaches us that the Law, by itself, cannot transform us into the likeness of Christ. But, even though that is the case, the Law is not the problem. God's Law is holy, righteous and good. The real problem is the treacherous nature of sin that still resides in us.

In chapters 1-4 Paul deals with *justification*. *Justification* is the aspect of salvation whereby we are delivered from the *penalty* of sin. Jesus bore the punishment for all our sin on the cross. When we receive by faith that He did this for us, His blood is applied to us and all our sin forgiven. We are declared righteous before God.

Once justified, we begin the second aspect of salvation which is called *sanctification*. *Sanctification* is the lifelong process of being delivered from the *power* of sin. The goal of sanctification is to be transformed in our character to be like Jesus. Paul deals with *sanctification* in chapters 5-8.

As we come to Romans 7:7-12 keep in mind Paul is dealing with *sanctification*. He is answering the question, “What is the process by which our lives are transformed to become like Jesus?”

THE LAW, BY ITSELF, CANNOT TRANSFORM US BECAUSE OF SIN'S TREACHERY

Romans 7:7 (ESV)

7 *What then shall we say? That the law is sin?*

Why does Paul ask this question?

What he previously wrote in verses 5-6 could be taken as blaming sin on the law of God.

Romans 7:5-6 (ESV)

5 *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. 6 But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.*

Paul explains in verses 7-12 that the problem is not with God's Law, but with the treacherous nature of sin. Far from denigrating God's Law, Paul defends the goodness of God's Law. One of the good qualities of the Law is that it defines sin so that we can avoid it.

Romans 7:7 (ESV)

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. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."*

Coveting is not a good thing. Coveting is wanting what another person has including another man's wife, his house, his property (Exodus 20:17). It's interesting that Paul chose a sin that initially is hidden in the heart. But if coveting goes unchecked it can lead to a whole host of sins such as adultery, burglary, even murder.

The problem is not God's Law, but the treachery of sin. Paul personifies sin in these verses. We are born with a sin nature. The essence of our sin nature is self-centeredness. We serve ourselves. We should be God-centered and God-serving, but we are self-centered and self-serving. This inclination is very strong and sinister. The Law of God, by itself, cannot transform us because of the treacherous way sin interacts with the Law.

Sin is aroused by the Law, not subdued.

Romans 7:7-8 (ESV)

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. For 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. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.*

What happens if you tell someone not to look? What do they want to do?

The good purpose of the law against coveting is to protect a person from the evil of coveting and all its potential consequences. But what does the sin inclination in that person do in response to the command not to covet? It arouses covetousness. Whereas before the command came, the person was content. But afterwards, the person starts thinking about what they have in comparison to so and so across the way. The good purpose of the Law is thwarted by the treachery of sin.

The Law of God is not the problem!

The problem is the sinful inclination still resident in our bodies.

The treacherous nature of sin to be aroused by the Law rather than subdued by it was first experienced in the Garden of Eden. It is the sinister nature of sin that plunged the human race into sin and death, not God's Law.

Teachers differ in their interpretation of verses 9-11. I believe Paul is going back to the Garden of Eden and so identifying with Adam and Eve that he speaks in the first person as if the events there happened to him.

Romans 7:9-11 (ESV)

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.*

When could Paul say he was ever alive apart from the law when he knew he was under God's wrath and born in Adam? The only time we were ever alive apart from the law was before the Fall in our unity with our federal head Adam and with Eve.

What command came to Adam and Eve?

Genesis 2:16-17 (ESV)

16 *And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, **17** but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."*

God's intent through this command was to protect Adam and Eve.

But something in the command aroused curiosity in Eve. Satan played off that curiosity insisting life would be even better if she ate. That's how sin deceives. Eve's desire was aroused and intensified until...

Genesis 3:6-8 (ESV)

6 *...the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. **7** Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.*

8 *And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.*

Disobeying the command did not make life better; it brought death. They were completely deceived by sin. Sin promised that if they disobeyed the command life would be better. But disobedience brought death.

God's Law has never been the problem.

The treachery of sin – going clear back to the Garden – has been and continues to be the problem.

Far from being sin, the Law of God is holy, righteous and good.

Romans 7:12 (ESV)

12 *So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.*

APPLICATION

First, we need to adopt the Apostle Paul's veneration for God's Law, particularly the Law of Moses. We have a tendency to speak negatively of the Mosaic Law because of the way it was practiced and abused by the pharisees and Jewish leaders in Jesus' day. The problem was not with the Law, but with the way Jews interpreted and applied it. The Law of God, including the Mosaic Law is holy, righteous and good.

Second, though we are no longer under the Mosaic Law we are under the Law of Messiah. We sometimes imply that because we are saved by grace through faith we have no law. But we do. We are to live according to the commands of the Lord Jesus Christ and the commands of His prophets such as the Apostle Paul, the Apostle John, the Apostle Peter and James.

Third, sanctification proceeds primarily by the renewing of our minds, but also includes living according to the Law of Messiah. But trying to obey the Law of Messiah in our own strength will not work because of the subversive nature of sin still dwelling in our bodies. In Christ, God has given us the Holy Spirit to aid us in obeying the Law of Messiah. Through the power of the Holy Spirit the treachery of sin can be defeated. We must learn how to live interactively with the Holy Spirit. It is through our relationship with Him that we will make real progress in becoming like Jesus.