

**Sermon for Sunday, March 7, 2010**  
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**WHAT THE LAW CANNOT DO**  
**Romans 7:1-14**

**1. God's law: What it can and cannot do.**

**Why do people break laws?** How should we view our illegal acts? Romans tells us that sometimes we break laws because we're deceived, we don't realize what we're doing. Sometimes we rebel - we know exactly what we're doing. The Lord wants us to understand our deception and rebellion and repent.

To illustrate, let's imagine that the battery of my watch is dying, slowing down, but I don't know it. I glance at my watch as I prepare to leave for a meeting and think, "Oh, I have more time than I realized!" Ten minutes later I hop in my car, see the clock, and realize the truth. I do *not* have time. I'm going to be late for a meeting I'm supposed to lead. So I drive fast, faster than the speed limit. The stop signs seem blurry. As I drive, I don't think, "I'm breaking the law," I think, "Hurry, you're late, and you are supposed to be in charge." Now imagine that I have a passenger. He/she says, "You just went through that stop sign at 14 miles per hour." I could say, "Right, I'd better slow down." Or, "Yes, and I'm going to take the next one at 15."

Why do people break laws? We often do it mindlessly, unaware. We break laws because we want something, the law says "No" and we *still* want it. In fact, our desire can blind us to the law. But sometimes we know exactly what we're doing. It's rebellion.

Sometimes we have a reason to break human laws, such as traffic laws – "People are waiting for me." Sometimes there seems to be a reason to break God's law. If someone is desperately hungry, they may steal an apple. Other sins make no sense. For example, Jesus says, "Don't worry." Worry betrays a lack of trust in God. And it does no good. No one can change anything by worrying about it. We simply make ourselves miserable. Yet we worry.

Or take the sin of envy. When we see the talents, graces and success of a friend or a neighbor, we should enjoy the talents and give thanks for the success. We should praise God for blessing our friend, thereby blessing us: "Give thanks in all things" (1 Thessalonians 5:18, cf. Psalm 100, 105-7, 118, 136). Sadly, instead of thanking God, we may think, "Why not me?" What a miserable thought.

The law has many virtues. First, it points out the right way to live, to please God. Second, it labels sin. Third, it restrains sin by stating the price of rebellion.

But the law cannot do two great things. First, the law cannot justify. Through the law we gain knowledge of sin. It shows that "No one is righteous... no one seeks God" (Romans 3:20). No one can be right with God by obeying the law. That is familiar.

Second, Romans 7 adds that law cannot sanctify either. So law cannot set us right with God. But even after we are right with God, law, by itself, cannot make us loving, holy or good. Law does not have power, power to obey. Indeed, perverse but true, the moment someone says, "Don't!" many say "Why not? What am I missing?" That's why, in Romans 7, Paul wants to describe freedom from the law.

This is universal human experience and the experience of Christians. Strange, the believer has new life in Christ. We want to make moral and spiritual progress and often do. Yet we struggle desperately in areas. One person drops their envy, their worry, their desires, another cannot.

**2. Freedom from the law: The right and wrong kinds of freedom.**

Paul's theme in Romans 7 is the place of law in God's plan. (He mentions laws and commands twenty-five times from 7:1-8:4.) Paul has told us some basics about the law. First, God wants us to obey. In Romans 2:13 he says, "It is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous [justified]." If anyone could practice the law and righteousness they would live by it (10:5). No one can, so law cannot be the basis of salvation. Still, the Lord genuinely wants us to obey the law and is pleased when we do.

Law makes us aware of sin, reveals it (3:20). Law defines sin as transgression (4:15). It was given, Paul even says, that "trespass might increase" (5:20). So the law drives us to Christ and the righteousness that "comes by faith" and "not through the law" (4:13). Through Romans, most references to the law are negative: "The law reveals sin, not salvation; it brings wrath, not grace."

Romans 6-7 says more: Once believers are right with God, Paul says, "You are not under law, but under grace" (6:14). In Romans 7, Paul the Christian has "died to the law." He is free - released or discharged from the law (7:2,4,6).

Paul illustrates his point through the case of the death of a spouse. The law, Paul says, "has authority over a man only as long as he lives" (Rom 7:1). But if anyone dies, he is free of the law. The dead have no duties or obligations. They don't pay taxes. Specifically, when a man dies, the laws of marriage no longer bind him. He need not work or wipe his feet or remember birthdays.

The wife is also free of her duties. "Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband... but if her husband dies, she is discharged [released] from the law concerning her husband" (7:2). "So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is... adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law" and can marry another man (7:3). If her husband dies and she remarries, it's not bigamy or adultery.

Our relationship with the law is like that. Till Christ came, we were bound to the law, which Paul compares to a bad husband. But by faith we died to that husband. We have no more obligations to it. Specifically, we no longer have to keep the law to be right with God, for Jesus kept the law for us.

When we falter and disobey God's law, we are not liable to punishment and condemnation, for Christ died for our sins and bore the punishment they deserve. The believer is therefore "released from the law" (7:2, 3). For an unbeliever, Paul compares our relationship with the law to a woman in a bad marriage.

Some days she doesn't want to work on it. Other days she does work, with no results: "So, my brothers, you also died to the law that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead that we might bear fruit to God" (7:4).

By faith, we have a new marriage to Christ, and it's good. The bad husband died. Now the woman marries a man who is kind, considerate, generous. Life is happier, more fruitful. With us, Jesus is our new partner - and master. Our lives are united to his.

Paul then shifts the analogy. He reminds us of our condition apart from Christ: "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" (7:5). But things changed when we turn to Jesus: "But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit" (7:6).

"Old written code?" We wonder: has Paul forgotten that the law comes from God? It expresses His character. We preserve life because God gives life. We care for widows and orphans because God cares for widows and orphans.

What of the Psalms? "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the ordinances of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether... By them is thy servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward." (Psalm 19:7-11).

Paul didn't forget. He knows the law in itself is good: "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (7:12). Every rule, regulation, and decree is good. But law doesn't give life or strength to obey the "written code" (7:6).

God does - the Spirit of God gives the capacity, the will, to obey. In itself, the law is good; the problem lies within us. Coveting is a test case.

### **3. In itself, the law is good; the problem lies within us.**

Quick review: We said that the law reveals sin and labels sin. It's possible to do something wrong and not know it. Paul says "If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin" (7:7). So law labels some things as sin. Specifically, it says certain mental states – coveting, envy - are sinful, even if no one acts on them. Paul says, "I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet'" (7:7).

Because coveting is an attitude, not an action, people may think it's OK to covet. But unchecked desires lead to terrible results:

- When good king David coveted another man's wife Bathsheba, he abused his power and betrayed his men in order to get and keep her.
- When wicked Ahab coveted the vineyard of a man named Naboth, he let his wife plan Naboth's murder so he could get it.

Coveting also leads to self-inflicted wounds. Saul coveted the gifts the Lord gave David and it ate him up and ruined his reign. The covetous resent God: "Why doesn't He treat me better, give me more?" The covetous resent their neighbors. "Why does she have...? She is no better than me." The covetous even resent themselves because they are not what they want to be. What misery! How wise to warn us!

The command "You shall not covet" tells us how the Lord wants us to see our desires. The problem is not desire per se. The Lord blesses some desires. Let's call them aspirations. God gives us energy, the ability to imagine great things and work for them. Paul aspired to preach the gospel where it had never been heard before – and that was good. So the law approves some goals and desires – selfless ones. But it forbids others - selfish desires. We need to hear that.

The law also tells us how to respond when we see something admirable. It forbids coveting, but it blesses admiration. In fact, the Bible assumes that we will notice and admire. The Bible's narratives candidly state that certain men and women were wise, handsome, strong, fearless. These traits attracted attention!

It is no sin to notice that a child is adorable, a man is confident, a woman is charming, a home is beautiful. It is normal to admire the talent of a leader, a carpenter, a designer, a teacher or athlete. It is good to appreciate beauty or excellence. The law teaches us the right way to admire greatness.

Admiration must not become jealousy, envy or obsession. Coveting wants to take what another has and possess it for oneself. Jealousy fixes on the person who has what I want. Jealousy wants another person to disappear, to fall, to be humiliated. Envy wants to possess another person's house, skill, or family. It is an obsession if the person we admire dominates our thoughts. Jealousy, envy and obsession are the children of the coveting heart. All are sinful and destructive.

But it is good to meditate on anything that is excellent: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, pure, lovely, admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things."

Philippians 4:8 tells us that we can even admire people and strive to imitate them: Paul says, "Take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you" (3:17). Again, "Whatever you have learned.. or heard from me, or have seen in me — put it into practice" (4:9).

The admirer notices that someone is a great parent or listener or cook. You can either covet it and resent it, or you can ask, "Can we talk? How did you acquire your skills and wisdom? Can you explain, show me, point me to resources?" This is healthy and constructive.

This is admiration too. Two lively single people, Francois and Emeline, meet at church. Francois admires Emeline's energy, friendliness and resolves, "I want to get to know her." He sees Emeline after church and talks to her for a minute. A week later, they "happen" to leave the building together and talk by the steps for twenty minutes. Emeline thinks it was a nice accident; Francois thinks his plan is working. Next week - lunch.

When the law says "You shall not covet," it teaches us how to observe things that are beautiful or excellent. It says you may admire great things, you may imitate the virtues of others. You may not hope that they lose it and that you get it. Don't indulge evil thoughts. Don't wish that you had his house, his wife, her husband, their jobs, their children.

Coveting is a sin of the mind. It is like all sins of the mind – worry, envy, hate, spite – which may or may not lead to action. Yet even if they stay entirely private, they hurt the sinner and diminish the beauty around them. If the heart covets, the joy for man and praise for God both disappear.

Decent people need to hear this! They do very few outward misdeeds. They are complacent, self-satisfied. It's easy to see why. But God's standards are higher... When he labels envy, anger, worry, we realize that everyone needs to admit that they sin and fall short of the glory God planned for us. Repent, turn to Lord Jesus, believe.

So far, we've seen that the law labels sin. Now Paul adds that the law can provoke sin. Paul says his sinful nature "seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire." Again in 7:11: "Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death" (7:8, 11). We get it. Laws gives people ideas. If the principle says, "No firecrackers in school" one boy will run home, find his brother's firecrackers and bring them to school the next day.

There is a well-known drug prevention program, designed to reduce experimentation with drugs in high schools. Is it effective? No, drug use is more likely to *increase* in areas that use the program. It makes certain students think, "What am I missing?"

A pastor from southern California used to commute from home to church past large groves of orange trees. He passed the trees for years without one thought of taking an orange for himself. Then one year the trees bore an enormous crop. To control dropping prices, the farmers gave some to food banks, but they also let a portion of the crop rot in the orchards. The pastor heard a radio comment on this one day as he drove by the orchards. The announcer: "And it is a crime even if a person who is hungry, thirsty or poor takes a single orange that is left to rot." At that moment, for the first time he was seized with desire to take an orange.

So the law provokes sin. Is this the fault of the law? Not at all. "The law... is holy, righteous and good" (7:12). It's good to know what to do when we see beauty, skill and success. Admire the beauty, imitate the skill - learn from it, celebrate the success and thank God for it. This is good counsel, friends! But there is rebellion in our hearts.

Unchecked, **sin brings death**. The law, standing by itself, often increases sin. Paul says, "When the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died" (7:9). Just as faith and endurance lead to eternal life, so selfish desire and sin lead to eternal death" (Revelation 20:14-15).

Jesus says, "Watch out and be on guard against covetousness" because he knows where it leads (Luke 12:15). We also hurt ourselves, because we don't realize what money can and cannot buy. Money can buy

- Medicine, but not health                      A house, but not a home
- Companionship, but not friends              Entertainment, but not happiness
- Food, but not an appetite.                      A bed, but not sleep.
- A good life, but not eternal life

The law reveals sin, **it provokes** sin and it also condemns sin and "brings us to the end of ourselves." Paul says, "when the commandment [about coveting] came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death" (7:9-10). Two points:

As a whole, God intended that his commands give people life. In the beginning, God intended the command "Don't touch the tree of life" to be a test mankind would pass and so find life. But the command stirred rebellion and brought death. And so it ever has been. Commands could give life, because they are wise and good, but our rebellion spoils them and takes life.

Some people think Paul is simply telling his own story here, but I think the essence is universal. For years Paul was confident that he was a good man, an obedient man who pleased God and was destined for eternal life. But he rested in outward obedience. But one day he realized the full sense of the tenth command. It requires an inward disposition of love to every man, of contentment with all God gives, of joy and peace in all He is and has and knows. Then he realized: "I cannot do this, nor do I wish it." And so sin led to death.

Although very few people are as zealous to obey God as Paul, his experience is common. Many people are satisfied with themselves until they understand the law in full. Then they see that they fall short and the law plus human effort cannot make up the deficit. We cannot reform ourselves. Most people do not even wish to do so. This is a predicament; the law cannot deliver us – who will?

#### **4. Law cannot deliver me; who will?**

Look with me at 7:11: "Sin deceived me and killed me." Sin deceives us in three ways: despair, rebellion, pride.

Despair: Sin urges us to give up: It's hopeless, I can't change, so why try? Or sin says God neither knows nor cares what we do, so what we do doesn't matter - as long as we hurt no one. Besides, the idea of God's judgment? Antiquated.

Or, sin teaches us to rebel. It says the law is oppressive and restrictive. It's too demanding. It keeps us from developing ourselves. My life is too complex to be governed by rules. I'm bigger than law.

But the greatest danger is pride - to look at the law and think. I can do that. I am doing that. No you aren't. The law about desire, about coveting makes the case perfectly. The laws about coveting, envy, greed and jealousy are good.

- How good it would be for us if we saw beauty and gave thanks for it.
- If we saw another person's blessing and praised God for them.
- If we saw excellence and got close to appreciate it and learn from it.

To live this way would be very good, but it's beyond us – all of us. I let envy enter my thoughts, too. But the Lord can use our failures, too. Romans 7:13: "Did that which is good, then, become death to me?"

By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment, sin might become utterly sinful." And then, Paul says, we will see our sin and turn to Christ.

First time – Good person, person whose sins are all too clear. Appeal

Disciples, too. Again and again. We need the gospel, which provides a righteousness that comes from God apart from law (3:21, 27, cf. 1:17).

So then, we violate law for many reasons – our own goals, rebellion, both thoughtless and deliberate, although we know the law is good. Even if outwardly good – we all fall to some mental sin - worry, envy, covet, pity selves, resenting God's ways. The law says no and Jesus releases you.

No more punishment. No more striving for perfection, trying to convince yourself of something that isn't true. By faith in the Lord, we are released from the law as burden, as code and condemnation. Then the prophecy of Zechariah will be true: "Men from many languages and nations will say 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you'" (Zechariah 8:23). The grace of Christ releases us from law – a relaxed sort of obedience.