

“Is the Law Sin?”  
 Romans 6-8  
 “*Citizens of Another Country*”  
 Part III

Author: Patrick J. Griffiths ©  
 Title: Is the Law Sin?  
 Text: Romans 7:7-12  
 Theme: Sin uses the Law to show us our inability to conform to God’s standard of holiness, righteousness, and goodness.

Introduction:

ILLUSTRATION:

When I was a small child, I was subject to things that were good for me, but whose immediate or long-term benefit escaped me (i.e. shots from the doctor, or dental work or simply going to bed). Because of this, I fought against it. My parents would do what was necessary for me to benefit from the thing that I thought was unnecessary. They would even use force against me. No matter how hard I fought against it, its conquest of me was certain.

The Law is, in many ways, like this. Because I do not see it for what it is, I fight against its imposing image and instead of embracing it for what it is, I lie defeated at its feet. The Law is a revelation of Jesus Christ and as such it is not sin.

Its eternal view:

If you do not see Christ in the Law, you will always be in bondage to the Law. This truth enables us to see the Law for what it is, a revelation of Jesus Christ. Because this is true, the Law no longer appears as a foreboding and impenetrable force, but an ally in our pursuit of Christ.

Again, the apostle concludes one thought and in so doing introduces another. Verse 7 is in response to the previous paragraph. Because we are not under law, but under grace does not mean we are lawless. And although we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter, this does not make the law and sin identical. The question is a very natural one “Is the law sin?”

**Question 3**     “What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? **May it never be!**  
 (7:7-12).

“What shall we say **then**? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet” (Rom. 7:7).

New Testament scholar Leon Morris assists us in noting the larger context for our present study.

“We should be clear that Paul is writing about the law, not trying to answer the questions that modern people ask. [The question he is addressing is singular, “Is the Law sin?”] It is with such questions that Paul is concerning himself, and we should not lose sight of where his argument leads in our anxiety to get answers to questions Paul is not asking.” (Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, PNTC, 276).

Although Christians are not under the Mosaic Law, Christians are not lawless. They are under the law of grace. The Law referred to is the Mosaic Code, the 613 laws governing the nation of Israel.

Prior to the cross, the Law incited the flesh to work in and through its instruments the fruit of death (7:5). Because believers are no longer under the dominion of law and have died to it, they have been released from it and thus are no longer bound to it. They no longer serve in the oldness of the letter but in newness of the Spirit (7:6). This thought will be expanded on later in chapters 7 and 8. Again the contrast is between sin and death and that of grace and life (5:21).

#### Our present danger:

There are two extremes present. **First**, we make the Law a rule book for Christian living. **Second**, we fail to see Christ in the Law. Both of these are a failure to see the Law for what it is. As New Testament believers, **we do not look to the Law for direction in life. But we do look to the Law for a description of Christ.** Yet we must not fail to see that the Law is a shadow of Christ.

#### ILLUSTRATION:

Think of the church’s two ordinances of believer’s baptism by immersion and the celebration of the Lord’s Table. Both of these actions are shadows. They are not the substance. If we fail to see them for what they are, we will either make them as means of meriting favor or have form without content.

The same is true with reference to the Law. You either see it for what it is, a shadow of Christ, or you will be crushed under the weight of trying to conform to it.

#### Our common patterns of seductions and distraction:

The Mosaic code as a revelation of Christ must not be attached to the government of grace lest we make grace powerless. Our propensity toward “doing” makes this threat always present. Christianity has done a disservice to the cross by always trying to add something more to what Christ has done. When He said, “It is finished,” He actually meant, “It is finished.”

There is always a danger of going further than the passage before us, so I will simply stop here and allow the text to speak for itself.

The picture Paul paints of the law forces the question, “Is the Law sin?” The following paragraph answers the question. Paul begins with stating the purpose of the Law.

## I. The purpose of the Law (vv. 7, 10)

<sup>7</sup> “What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COVET.’ <sup>10</sup> and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me” (Rom. 7:7, 10).

Although the Law shows me to be a law breaker, the fault does not lie in the law but in me. The Law is holy, righteous, and good. I am unholy, unrighteous, and bad. The Law is a revelation of Jesus Christ and as such it shows me who He is and in contrast who I am.

“The sense, then, is this: “It was by means of the law that I came to know what a virulence and strength of sinful propensity I had within me.” The *existence* of this it did not need the law to reveal to him; for even the heathens recognized and wrote of it. But the dreadful nature and desperate power of it the law alone discovered--in the way now to be described.” (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown)

“He is not saying that he did not know the meaning of the word. He is saying that he did not know the thing. The law brought home to him coveting, **his coveting**. In the light of the law **he came to know his sin.**” (Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, PNTC, 279 [emphasis added]).

The purpose of the commandment “You shall not covet” was not to result in death, but in life. The problem is sin. Because of sin, we break the commandment and the broken law produces death in me. The law shows my sin for what it is. Sin, using the Law, causes me to be a Law breaker.

“The commandment, which was ordained to life, was intended as a guide in the way to comfort and happiness, proved unto death, through the corruption of nature (v. 10), Many a precious soul splits upon the rock of salvation; and the same word which to some is an occasion of life unto life is to others an occasion of death unto death. The same sun that makes the garden of flowers more fragrant makes the dunghill more noisome; the same heat that softens wax hardens clay; and the same child was set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel. The way to prevent this mischief is to bow our souls to the commanding authority of the word and law of God, not striving against, but submitting to it.” (Matthew Henry’s Commentary)

The fact that the apostle uses coveting is somewhat irrelevant. He could have chosen any of the other nine inside of the Decalogue or any of the other 604 commandments. His choice, though intentional, could have been any of the other commandments to prove his point. All of us are law breakers.

The conclusion we must not come to is that those without the law are sinless or ignorant of their sins.

“People who do not have the law may well know that they have done wrong. But people without God’s law do not see wrongdoing as it really is, as sin against God.” (Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, PNTC, 278).

The Law did not produce death. It was sin taking occasion through the Law that produced death. The Law showed just how sinful sin really is.

This leads us to our second thought within the paragraph.

## II. The abuse of the Law (vv. 8, 9, 11)

The word used in our text for “opportunity” speaks of “a place from which a movement or attack is made, a base of operations.” The word is used six times in the New Testament and all of them by Paul (Rom. 7:8, 11; 2 Cor. 5:12; 11:12; Gal. 5:13; 1 Tim. 5:14).

The Law is the podium for sin’s pronouncement. It is a stage for sin’s performance. The Law reveals sin as sin (v.7) and shows sin to be exceedingly sinful (v.13). What does the Law do? The Law causes me to know sin as sin. I would not know that my covetousness is sin unless the Law said, “thou shall not covet.” But sin took advantage of the Law by using it to produce in me sin(s). The Law reveals my deadness to sin. I am in bondage to sin because of the Law’s revelation of my nature (v.9). I was free until the Law said, “you can’t”. It was then I realized my transgression and lawlessness.

The Law is not sin, but sin used the Law as a place from which it could launch its attacks against us. Such usage “depicts sin as engaging in a military operation.” (Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, PNTC, 280). This is where we often fail in our fight against sin and for Jesus. There is an actual war going on and most Christians are oblivious to it. Sin is an aggressor that accepts no compromise and never goes quietly into the night.

It is much like our physical bodies. This “flesh” is an instrument that can be used for sin or for righteousness. This “flesh” is not sin, but sin can use it to animate itself.

Sin seized the opportunity the Law afforded it and scooted in. It shot through the opening (v. 11).

The Law says, “Do not lust.” The purpose of that Law was to protect me from misplaced affections and priorities. But my sin drove me to lust after that which would be my demise.

### A. Sin produced in me lusting of every kind (v. 8)

“But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead” (Rom. 7:8).

The conjunction “but” is contrasting.

The NASB consistently translates the word “desire” or “lust” with coveting. Coveting seems so innocuous (i.e. bland or harmless) for us. The word “lust” best captures the idea wishing to be conveyed.

“By using the word "lust" only, in the wide sense of all "irregular desire," or every outgoing of the heart towards anything forbidden, the sense will best be brought out.” (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown)

“Desire means precisely that exaltation of the ego which we have seen to be of the essence of sin. It means putting the sinner in the supreme place. “The essential point in ἐπιθυμία is that it is desire as impulse, as a motion of the will. It is, in fact, lust, since the thought of satisfaction gives pleasure and that of non-satisfaction pain.” Ἐπιθυμία is anxious self-seeking.” (f. Buchsel, TDNT, III, p. 171) inside of (Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, PNTC, 279).

“Before its extensive demands and prohibitions come to operate upon our corrupt nature [sin was dead] that is, the sinful principle of our nature lies so dormant, so torpid, that its virulence and power are unknown, and to our feeling it is as good as ‘dead.’” (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown)

The word “produced” means “to work fully.” It is a compound word that speaks of finishing, of completing.

#### ILLUSTRATION:

Sin is like the mature dandelion that explodes under the gusting of the winds and carried to the far reaches of the fields in the souls of mankind only to breed a harvest of unthinkable horror.

The full face of our lusting is unknown to us until sin, taking advantage of the commandment, shows us the blackness of our own emptiness. **We want what we do not have and we seek to fill it with what we do not know.** You will never be content with the created until you find your contentment in the Creator.

#### B. Sin awakened my conscience to transgression (v. 9)

The “for” of verse 9 is explanatory.

“I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died” (Rom. 7:9).

The Law brought a kind of “resurrection” to sin. The Law brought sin back to life. It “sprang to life.” Whereas once my consciousness of sin was dormant, now it leaped into action.

“When I did not know the law, then I thought that I indeed lived: for my conscience never troubled me, because it was not aware of my disease.” (The Geneva Bible)

“In the days of my ignorance, when, in this sense, a stranger to the law, I deemed myself a righteous man, and, as such, entitled to life at the hand of God.” (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown)

“Paul is referring to the life of the natural man, the happy pagan, the person who lives cheerfully with no reference to the law and with an untroubled conscience.” (Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, PNTC, 281).

### C. Sin deceived me and through it killed me (v. 11)

“for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me” (Rom. 7:11).

The “for” is explanatory. The word “deceived” is found in five New Testament references (Rom. 7:11; 16:18; 1 Cor. 3:18; 2 Cor. 11:3; 2 Thess. 2:3). It means “to deceive fully, to beguile.” It is the same word used of the serpent’s deception of Eve. Deception paints a false picture of reality. It wants you to believe something that is false in order to destroy that which is true.

“We should be clear that it was not the commandment that slew Paul. God’s commandment is always directed towards life. It was sin that killed the apostle. Sin took advantage of the situation and used the commandment to bring about Paul’s death.” (Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, PNTC, 283).

“The conclusion: that the law is holy in itself, and that all the fault is in us, the ones who abuse the law.” (The Geneva Bible)

This leads us to our third thought within the paragraph.

### III. The character of the Law (v. 12)

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

“So then introduces the consequence, the conclusion to which this reasoning leads up. The law may have been used by sin, but that does not make sin and law identical or even put them in the same class.” (Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, PNTC, 283).

“He says, ‘the Law, *indeed* (μεν), with the implied antithesis that ‘sin, *on the other hand,*’ is the opposite; the whole fault of his misery beneath the Law lies with sin.” (H.C.G. Moule, The Epistle to the Romans, 197 [emphasis his]).

Matthew Henry rightly notes how, “Laws are as the law-makers are. God, the great lawgiver, is holy, just, and good, therefore his law must needs be so.”

I have always been perplexed by this idea. We are often contrasting the Law against grace and see the ideas as opposing armies locked in mortal combat. There is a

sense in which this conclusion is correct, but there is another aspect of this relationship that needs to be opened.

The Law's foreboding presence is only because of the content of what it reveals. God is in the Law. His presence is a consuming fire. He manifests Himself with lightening and thunder. The earth quakes in His presence. The Law tells me who I am and because of this, I hate it. But the fault does not lie in the Law, but in me.

When Isaiah saw the Lord, He said, "I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). When Samson's parents saw the angel of the LORD they said, "We will surely die, for we have seen God" (Judges 13:22). When Jesus stood before Peter, Peter said, "Lord depart from me for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8). All of creation bows before Him and cries, "We are not worthy."

Verse 10 speaks of the Law's purpose as producing life. Although the character of the Law is unchanging, the impact Law has on the individual is significantly different because of the fall of mankind. For the believer, the Law reveals Jesus Christ and in so doing moves him to love God more. For the unbeliever, the Law in revealing God moves the sinner to fear. Leon Morris correctly notes how, "There is a healing function in the law's work of convicting the sinner." (Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, PNTC, 279).

The Law is a shadow of who God is. Christ is the substance of the Law. He is the one who casts the shadow of Law. In the incarnation, the Law became man and dwelt among us. What we saw dimly in the Law became crystal clear in Jesus Christ. Because He fulfills the Law, the Law's purpose of shadow no longer was needed. There is no reason to embrace the shadow when the substance is present.

Because of Christ, the Law as a foreboding entity is tamed. In the power of His cross, the power of sin working through the Law is dead (1 Cor. 15:55-57). Because the believer has been "immersed" into union with Christ and His finished work has been accounted to him (Rom. 6:1-14), the threat of the broken Law has been removed. Believers are no longer under law, because Christ is the fulfillment of the Law, the embodiment, the personification, the full expression of it. For the believer to seek the Law instead of Christ is tantamount to kissing a picture of a loved one instead of the loved one themselves.

Pictures can never satisfy need. A picture of food will never stifle hunger and a picture of water will never quench thirst. Neither can pictures of Christ (i.e. the Law), be for us what Christ is.

Paul tells us that the Law is not sin. In fact, the law is holy, righteous, and good (Rom. 7:12). The weight of this statement can only be seen when we yield our thinking to the all consuming nature of who Christ is and what He has done and our union with Him. Jesus Christ is the Law.

The Law is only a shadow of Christ. Its purpose is to reveal who He is. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Law. It is my sin that shows me my inability to measure up to His standard of holiness, righteousness, and ceremonial goodness. If we were not in sin, we would find the Law an attraction, but instead it becomes for us something abhorrent because of its condemning nature in contrast to my sinful inability.

Verse 12 leads us into our 4<sup>th</sup> question found in verse 13.

APPLICATION: (What's the NEXT STEP?)

1. See the Law for what it is; a revelation of Jesus Christ.
2. See sin for what it is; an opportunist for evil.
3. Your dissatisfaction with God does not lie in God's deficiency, but in yours.
4. Leave off embracing the shadows of Christ and start embracing Christ.