

# How Sin Uses the Law to Kill

## Romans 7:7-13

Imagine a man walks into a room and sees a chair with a sign on it that says, “*Do not touch.*” He reads the sign and starts to walk away but then comes back to the chair, looks around to see if anyone is watching and then touches it with his finger. Unfortunately, his finger sticks to the chair. Trying to pull and push to free his finger, his whole hand gets stuck to the chair. In his efforts to remove his stuck hand, his other hand gets stuck. In the process of trying to free his hands he ends up sitting in the chair and now his entire body is stuck to the chair. He tries in vain to break free but in exasperation gives up and lives with the chair stuck to his body.

There’s something about a command that make us want to break it, isn’t there? As we learned last week, *true freedom from sin comes from a relationship with Jesus, not from keeping the rules.* Throughout Romans we have seen that Paul makes a close connection between sin and the law. By the law, Paul means the Old Testament law of Moses as summarized in the Ten Commandments. Sin and the law go together. He stated it strongly in several verses:

Romans 3:20 - **Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.**

Romans 4:14-15 - **For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression.**

Romans 5:20 - **Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. ...**

Romans 6:14 - **For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.**

Romans 7:6 - **But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.**

Paul has shown over and over again that no one is made right with God by keeping the law, righteous cannot come through the law.

So that teaching that leads to a question: Because the law of God increases sin and cannot save, Is the Law of God evil? How should we as Christians deal with the law? What purpose do God’s Commandments serve?

Our passage this morning will help us see that God’s Law is good, but sin uses it to kill us. Paul’s approach is to contrast the Law and sin. He first shows the good purpose of the Law, as given by God, and then contrasts the evil use to which sin puts the Law. The Law was intended to define sin and to make sin evident (7:7-8). Sin abused the Law, using it to multiply sin (7:8). The Law was intended to promote life, but sin used it to promote death (7:10). The Law was given to men to reveal the truth to men; sin used the Law to deceive us (7:11).

Follow along in your Bibles as I read Romans 7:7-13

**7 What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet."**

**8 But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead.**

**9 I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.**

**10 And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death.**

**11 For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me.**

**12 Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.**

**13 Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful.**

In these verses Paul shows that while the Law and sin are closely associated, they are very different. The Law is righteous; sin is hideously evil. Sin seeks to use the Law, which is good, to achieve its own evil purposes.

### **1. Sin is exposed by the Law (Rom. 7:7).**

Look at Romans 7:7: ***“What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.”*”**

Once again Paul anticipates a question from his readers and then quickly answers it. He verbalizes what some may be thinking. If we have died to the Law as Rom. 7:4 says, and since the Law causes our sinful passions to be aroused (Rom. 7:5), then maybe the Law itself is sin. Maybe the law is the real problem.

This kind of thinking is as real and relevant as the daily news. Our culture would have us believe that sin is beautiful and that the Law (or God’s rule) is ugly. God’s word says that there are two genders, male and female, and that God created people this way. But our popular culture says that truth, that law of God, is evil, it is repressive. This culture teaches that if our world were just rid of the law of God then people could be truly free to be who they really are.

So because the law exposes sin as sinful, many think it is the law itself that is the problem. Once again Paul answers this objection abruptly with the phrase, ***“Certainly not!”*** *“May it never be!”*

Paul then gives us the first purpose of the Law. ***“I would not have known sin except through the law.”*** The Law exposes, or illuminates, sin. Like a straightedge, when we compare ourselves to it, we see how crooked we are. Or, like a mirror, the Law shows us what we’re really like. An old Chinese proverb says: *“To an ugly man, every mirror is an enemy.”* The mirror is not the problem; it’s my ugly face. (see James 1:23-24).

The Law shows us how sinful we really are.

Paul then gives an example of how the Law exposes our sin by using the 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment. ***“For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.”*** Coveting is *“an intense desire to possess something (or someone) that belongs to another person.”* (Bible Dictionary) Why did Paul chose this particular commandment?

- **The 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment stands for all the rest.** By quoting a portion of the final commandment, Paul summarizes all the others.
- **This commandment deals with inner attitudes of the heart.** Coveting is a sin of the mind and heart. We can covet, and no one may ever know it. Murder and stealing are visible sins which are immediately apparent to anyone who sees the

evidence of a dead body or missing goods. Sin begins in the heart and one can covet without anyone knowing it. While some of us can say that we haven't broken some of the commands that deal with outward actions, every one of us has sinned inwardly.

- **Coveting can consume us.** Jesus warns against greed and the thinking that we always need more than we already have in Luke 12:15: ***“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”***
- **Coveting is a root sin which often leads to other sins.** If we could peel back our motives when we sin, a spirit of coveting is often behind what we do. Coveting in and of itself seems to do no harm to anyone, but it very frequently provides the motivation for stealing and even murder. In Colossians 3:5, Paul equates coveting (or greed) with idolatry.

All of this powerfully demonstrates Paul's point. Unless God's Law had identified coveting as a sin, we would never have recognized it as such. Coveting is like a tumor hidden inside our body. Because it is not external, like murder, we do not recognize its deadly existence and nature. The Law is like an x-ray, exposing it for what it is and warning us that we must deal with it.

So sin is exposed by the law. The Law illuminates sin by showing us the depth of our depravity. Second, the Law ignites sin.

## **2. Sin uses the Law to provoke us to more sin (Rom. 7:8-9).**

Paul personifies sin as an active force that uses the law to provoke us to commit acts of sin. Verse 8, ***“But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead.”*** The Law exposes the evil lurking in our lives and then sin takes that law and uses it to stimulate more sin.

There's something within us that makes us want “to do” when the sign says “don't.” I'm told a hotel on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico in Galveston, Texas put this notice in each room: *“No Fishing from the Balcony.”* Yet, every day, hotel guests threw in their lines to the water below. The management decided to try a different approach and so they removed all the signs. The fishing stopped immediately. The sign had ignited sin.

But that's how sin operates in the hearts of rebels. It takes God's good and right commandments and entices us to violate them. So sin in us springboards off the commandment to provoke us to sin.

What does Paul mean when he says, ***“For apart from the Law sin is dead”***?

Before God brought the law to bear on Paul's conscience, as far as he knew, he wasn't in sin. He saw himself as a good person. In Philippians 3:4-6 Paul gives the testimony of his life before Christ, ***“If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: 5 circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; 6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.”***

The law had not yet revived the sin that lay dormant in his heart. Apart from the law, sin seems to be dead as far as the sinner is concerned. In fact he thought he was really living. Look at verse 9: ***“I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.”***

Once, Paul thought that he was alive and doing quite well in God's sight. He saw himself as blameless with regard to the righteousness of the law (Phil. 3:6). Like the

Pharisee in Jesus' story, he would have prayed (Luke 18:11-12), "**God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.**" In that sense, Paul saw himself as once alive apart from the law since the law had not yet convicted him on the heart level.

But then "the commandment came"—"You shall not covet." He had memorized that commandment as a child. He had recited it many times. But the Holy Spirit had not nailed him with it. Maybe it was when he was Stephen being stoned to death and the look of love, forgiveness, and peace that radiated from his face. Paul coveted.

God's law hit him and he suddenly realized that his sin was very much alive and he was dead. He saw that he was not right with God, as he formerly had thought. Rather, he was alienated from God and under His judgment. He had thought that he would get into heaven because he was a zealous Jew, and even a notch above other Jews, because he was a Pharisee. But now he realized that he was a blasphemer, a persecutor of God's church, a violent aggressor, and the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:13, 15).

Paul is saying that before the Law exposed his heart, he thought he had it all. But when the Law came, it ignited his passions and caused sin to spring to life. Before all this happened he thought he was alive, but sin had sucked the very life out of him.

### **3. Sin uses the Law to kill us (Rom. 7:10-13).**

The Law exposes sin, sin uses the law to provoke more sin and finally, it brings death. Verses 10-11, "***And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me.***"

The phrase "sprang to life" reminds us of Genesis 4:7 where Cain is warned to do the right thing before sin takes him down: "***Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.***"

Sin preys on people and looks for every opportunity to kill us.

The Law tells us how to live and then condemns us for not living up to it. This addresses those Jews who believed that the Mosaic Law had life-giving power – the Law doesn't extinguish sin; it ignites it. Law-living then, and even now, leads to death.

Leviticus 18:5 tells us that we "***may live if we do God's commands.***" The problem is that none of us can keep the commands and so they end up killing us.

The word "***deceived***" in verse 11 means to seduce thoroughly by leading someone astray or making them lose their way. Let's think of some ways that sin deceives us. Have you ever heard "sin" say these words to you?

1. "You're not as sinful as the Bible says you are. In fact, you are really a good person."
2. "What the Bible says is unreasonable and oppressive." (Genesis 3:5)
3. "This isn't really sin, anyway. You're not angry; just frustrated. It's not adultery; it's just a relationship. You're not lying; you're just stretching the truth."
4. "Go ahead and do it. No one will ever know."
5. "Everyone's doing it."
6. "You can't stop this sin or break this addiction because you've been doing it so long."

7. "This will make you happy."
8. "You won't get caught."
9. "God will forgive you anyway."
10. Then, after sinning, we hear these words: "You've really messed up. God won't forgive you now."

Sin deceives. Don't underestimate the deceitfulness of sin. Hebrews 3:13 warns us about the hardening that can come as a result of sin's deceitfulness: "**but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.**"

That is one reason why our gathering together as a church is so important. I need your encouragement and you need mine. If I'm not encouraging you, I could be contributing to the hardening of your own heart. Sin deceives and according to James 1:15 it also leads to death: **Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.**

We come now to the answer that is raised by the question in Romans 7:7: "**Is the Law sin?**" Look at verse 12: "**Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.**" The problem is not with the Law; the problem is with Law-breakers like us. The Law is:

**Holy.** God's Law is set apart and full of purity, majesty and glory because God the Giver of the Law is holy. *The Law is holy but cannot make us holy.*

**Righteous.** God's Law is impartial, fair, and never wrong. *The Law is righteous but cannot make us righteous.*

**Good.** It tells us the way to live and tells us when we fail to live that way. *The Law is good but can never make us good.*

In that sense, there's nothing wrong with the Law because it shows our deep sinfulness and our need for the Savior. Look at Rom. 7:13: "**Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful.**"

There's something within us that resists the phrase "**exceedingly sinful**" Paul uses the worst word he can think of (sin) and then puts a strong adjective in front of it. Sin deceives, it defiles and finally it destroys. Because of sin, the Law illuminates, it ignites, and it incinerates.

Brian Bill illustrates this with a story from his childhood:

"When I was about 8 or 9 I was fascinated with kitchen matches and had been warned several times to not play with them. My mom's friend had a couple sons my age and so we hung out. To my delight I quickly found out they were fascinated with fire as well so we snuck some kitchen matches from the kitchen and headed out to a forest preserve.

As we walked we lit matches using every conceivable surface. We lit them off the ground, off our teeth, and even off the buttons on our shirts. When we'd light a match it would *illuminate* everything. When we got into the forest, we had gotten braver (or more stupid) and began throwing lit matches into the long dry

grass and watched everything *ignite*. We thought this was fun as we'd laugh and try to stomp the flames out. Unfortunately, the wind whipped up and started a raging inferno, *incinerating* everything in its path. We did the brave thing and ran like mad; stopping to tell someone that the forest was on fire.

As we headed back to my buddies' house, we heard the fire trucks racing toward the forest preserve. We were trying to figure out how we could avoid telling our parents and I knew *I* was incinerated at that point because my mom would be able to tell that I had done something wrong. Sure enough, as soon as we walked in, she asked what I had done. I broke down and told her. I still remember her making me call the fire department to tell them that we did it. That was not easy to do but I don't play with matches anymore.

I had been told to not mess around with matches but I did it anyway. At first the match *illuminated* my deliberate disobedience and then it *ignited* a fire I couldn't put out and finally my sin *incinerated* a forest. Sin is like that."

We may summarize the thrust of Paul's words in our text this way: It is sin that is evil and the Law of God that is good.

### **Action Points:**

**1. Call sin "sin."** The next time you sin, don't tell God or someone else that you made a mistake, you're sorry and hope they just forget about it. Instead say, "*I sinned. Please forgive me.*"

We need to admit our brokenness before we can be put back together. We must see our lostness before we will be attracted to the Lord. If we don't see our need, we'll walk away.

**2. Confess that you are a sinner and receive the Savior.**

Think about how Jesus dealt with the Rich Young Ruler in Luke 18. This wealthy man wanted to know how he could obtain eternal life. Jesus took him to the second half of the ten commandments in Lk 18:20:

***You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.'*"** The man stuck his chest out and said, ***"All these I have kept since I was a boy."*** Jesus then went deeper and drew out an application from the Commandment #1: ***"You shall have no other gods before me"*** when he said these stinging words to this man who had money as his master: ***You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.***"

The Bible says that instead of confessing his sin, he just became very sad and walked away from the Savior. He was not willing to admit that he was a sinner and so he had no need for the Savior.

Can you identify with Paul's experience? Has God's holy law hit home to your conscience so that you died to all self-righteousness? Has the law killed all your hopes that your good works will get you into heaven? If so, that's a good thing, because Jesus didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). When you see God's holy standard and how miserably you have violated it over and over, you then see your need for a Savior. And the best news ever is that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15)!