

All Roads Lead Here: I Fought The Law and the Law Won
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 51:1-3; John 15:18-25; Romans 7:7-13

Our final Scripture reading today is Romans 7:7-13. May God breathe life into our hearts through the reading of His holy Word. “What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.” But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. 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.”

When I was 7 or 8, I got my first taste of rock ‘n roll listening to oldies with my mom. One of my first cassettes was called “Leaders of the Pack.” It had a bunch of ‘50s hits like “Runaway,” “Oh Donna” and, of course, “Leader of the Pack.” But one song that stood out was “I Fought The Law.” Anybody remember that song? (I won’t ask if you were around when it came out.) It told the story of a guy in prison who used to be rob folks and how he missed his girl. The chorus was simply, “I fought the law and the law won.”

That’s an ongoing theme in the book of Romans. Paul discusses how the Law God gave the Israelites affects Christians. It’s an important topics for us because as believers, we want to live as followers of Jesus Christ – and He took the Law of God very seriously, never breaking it once. Paul is going to walk us through the effects of the Law over the next few weeks.

Let’s review where we’ve already been. We’ve seen the prevalence of sin everywhere in the human heart and mind – we can’t fix our natural disobedience to the ways of God ourselves. But we live in the best part of history because we know Jesus – because He’s already come so we might have forgiveness of our sins. The heroes of the faith weren’t right with God because they were perfect but because they trusted in God and they trusted God.

So how does the Old Testament law fit into all this? We learned last week that the Law does great things for us – it leads us to Christ, it gives us insight into God’s character, it restrains us from the worst sins we might do, and it shows us ways to please God. But we need to be released from it because, despite all the good it does, it’s a harsh taskmaster. There is no mercy in the law – you either break it and are on the wrong side of God, or you keep it and are right with Him. We are doomed if we are bound to the law because there’s no grace or forgiveness, and in some way or another, we all break it.

I was really proud of Tracy last week because she guessed where Paul has to head next. She asked me after service, “If we’re not bound to the law as Christians, then what are we supposed to do? Is there something wrong with the law?” That’s where we have to go, right? We’re on thin ice. God gave us the Law; it has good purposes; we need to know it; but we have to consider the possibility that if the Law doesn’t apply to us as it once did, it might be bad.

That’s what Paul answers when he says, “What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not!” Just because it’s no longer in effect for Christians doesn’t mean that it’s bad or wrong or evil. Think about the computers NASA used to get us into space. An iPhone 6 is over 1,000 times faster and has 30,000 times the memory of the computer used on the Apollo mission to the moon. Yet that computer still got us to the moon. We don’t use them any more not because they were bad or wrong. They fulfilled exactly the mission they were made for. We have replaced those computers with something that better fulfills the same purpose.

In the same way, Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law, which was perfect yet incomplete. Jesus gives us forgiveness for sins not covered by the Law. Jesus frees us from all the laws that set apart Israel as God’s unique people but that didn’t have a distinctly moral purpose. Jesus inspires us and guides us to live with moral character in a way that the law didn’t inspire. But the law was not wrong in any way, and it wasn’t sin. God commanded His people in the Old Testament era to follow it, so it can’t be sin.

That’s where Paul goes next. He writes, “Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.” But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire.” Did you ever get pulled over and think, “What did I do?” That happened to me when I had a busted tail light. We don’t think it’s fair if we’re judged without knowing what we’ve done. Through the law, God made it known what He expected.

The law is meant for our good and tells us what God desires us of us, but it gets twisted by our sin nature. It starts a fire in us to do what we wouldn’t necessarily think of doing. When the speed limit was 55 in the ‘70s and ‘80s, everyone was upset you couldn’t go 65. Now the speed limit is 70 and still nobody’s happy. Everyone wants to break the law even though we’re going 15 miles an hour faster. The warning at the beginning of every DVD that says it’s illegal to sell, copy, or show the video to almost anyone? It makes me want to show the video to everyone I can before it’s due back! It’s true at an early age – you tell a child not to eat a cookie. Where do they head next? To the cookie jar! It’s so common, it’s a cliché!

The disobedience we carry within us finds its opportunity through the law. That’s what Paul says next: “For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.” What does this mean? You can’t deliberately displease God apart from law. You can sin, but it’s ignorant. If Mom never said you can’t eat cookies before dinner, you displease her by eating them, but you haven’t broken a law. You haven’t deliberately disobeyed. But once she says “no,” to try to eat more cookies is deliberate.

Sin has no outlet without the law. It's dead in that if God hasn't taught us His ways, even though we have the sin nature inside of us that wants to disobey God, it can't spring to life. We can still do wicked things; we have a basic knowledge of good and evil without the law. In Genesis 6, God flooded the world because of people's wickedness, but He only brought judgment after they had incredibly long lives because there was no law to make it clear how He wanted them to act. He was merciful by withholding judgment for a long time.

But sin wasn't so much dead-dead as it was dormant. It needed something to revive it, and that was the law. On Memorial Day, we remember those who gave their lives for our country's good. We remember events like Pearl Harbor, the sneak attack that brought our country into World War II. Soon afterwards, Japan realized it was a huge tactical error. Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto said shortly after the attack, "I fear we have awakened a sleeping giant and filled him with a terrible resolve." He was right. That atrocity turned the US towards the war, and perhaps the chief reason the Allied powers won the war was because we got involved. That was a wonderful thing for the world, even though it came at great cost.

But waking a sleeping giant can have negative consequences, and that was true with the law and sin. Because of our natural inclination to fight God tooth and nail, God's perfect law nevertheless did CPR on the sin nature in us. Sin uses the law to bring to life all sorts of issues in us that we didn't even know we had. It deceives us by promising us pleasure in defying God. And there is pleasure in it – otherwise, we wouldn't do it. We find pleasure in forbidden lusts, in slandering others, in angry outbursts, in subtly stealing the work of others.

But it's the devil's sham. Because pleasure doesn't equal happiness, and while there is immediate pleasure in breaking the law, it kills our hearts and deadens our souls. Happiness isn't found in breaking the law. True, rich, fulfilling happiness only comes when we are satisfied in God. But when we fall for the lie, breaking the law comes with the penalty of death. We have to be freed from the law because it condemns us; there is no hope under the law. And what science has found is that often, once we've made a sinful moral choice, our brains rewire themselves towards the sins we enjoy and we physically become enslaved to them, addicted to them. We are truly in bondage until God rescues us.

Paul continues, "So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. 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." The law is good; it was given to us by God, it was written by God, and it tells us how to be right with God. Is something so good also bad at the same time? No! But amongst all the other things that the law does, it makes us extremely aware of the evil we do and the sin we commit. Follow the law, God says, and you will live. Sin produces death, not the law; the law just reveals to us the truth that we will die when we sin.

Through the law, we see sin as sin. The law is a mirror that perfectly reflects our true selves back at us. Now have you ever walked in front of a mirror and done nothing? Not pushed back a loose hair or picked at something? It's impossible. Even if we think we look really good, we fuss. And the mirror points out things that we would otherwise ignore. People get obsessed in front of a mirror because they see all these things they want to correct.

Maybe you've seen the movie *Mean Girls*. It's about a girl who grew up a happy kid in Africa without much social interaction. When her family moves to the States, she gets caught up in a clique of "mean girls" – they're gorgeous and popular, and they don't have to be nice because everybody wants to be them. There's a telling scene in the movie when the three "mean girls" get in front of a mirror and they each start pointing out their flaws. We've established these are the prettiest girls in school, but they're super critical of every little thing they see as wrong with themselves. And the girl who grew up in Africa, who has no body issues, starts questioning herself. Even the most "perfect" person gets in front a mirror and finds their defects.

The law is that mirror for us on a moral level. We don't think about our morality on a daily basis, particularly not before we come to believe in Christ as Savior and Lord. Most people want it that way. And without God, our morals change often. We don't want other people to steal from us, but when we want something we can't afford, we take it and explain it away as a moral choice. Spreading gossip becomes "telling the truth." Ignoring the poor becomes an excuse: "they'll just use the money for drugs."

But the mirror of the law is unblinking, unbending, uncompromising, and unforgiving. It points out every flaw in our morals, every time we've disobeyed, every incident where we've rebelled. The law of God shows us we are sinners. The law makes sin utterly sinful because, in front of its mirror, our excuses die. We can turn away from the mirror, but it's still there. We can't unsee what it shows us. At its best, the mirror of the law show us our hopelessness and leads us to cry to Jesus for hope and help and forgiveness...and thanks be to God, He is there.

So how can this section of Scripture change our lives? There're two things I want us to do as a result of being here today. The first one is this: *let's call sin sin*. We hate the word "sin" because it implies we are subject to God and that we've displeased Him. A society that doesn't believe in God cannot believe in sin; it hates the idea. That's why the modern church talks so little about sin – it's hard to attract people who hate the church's message. You know, we try to attract people to the church with events like Meal and a Movie Night. Nothing wrong with that! But we cannot proclaim God's forgiveness without mentioning there's something to forgive.

We prefer to talk about making mistakes. But a lot of mistakes aren't sins. Your brain melts and you don't do well on a test. You fumble some words in a speech. You fall off the monkey bars and break something. Your foot slips on the brake and you run into the ditch. Mistakes? Yes. Sins? No. And there are things we feel bad about that aren't sins either. It's no sin to be sad. It's no sin to want to be around other people and it's no sin to want some solitude. And while sometimes we feel shame when someone else has hurt us, abused us, or turned their backs on us, we haven't sinned when someone else has harmed us.

But when we have sinned, let's call it what it is: sin. When we have ignored and deliberately disobeyed God's ways, let's not soften it with pretty euphemisms. Let's not lessen the blow of it. Because let's be honest: we don't need salvation if all we do is make mistakes. We don't need to come to church and grow closer to God if we just have little errors that need correcting. There are enough self-help books and life coaches and psychotherapists out there to help us if we just need to get back on track with life.

But sin is different. Sin is first and foremost against God. It is not a mistake that can be fixed or a slip-up that can be overlooked. When you've offended your Maker, when you are at war with Him, it's a great big deal. It's a huge problem that only He can solve – it's too big for us to handle.

During the great revivals of Christianity when thousands upon thousands came to trust in Jesus, preachers talked about sin a lot. It's when you know you have a crisis on your hands of eternal proportions, a crisis you can't fix, that the salvation that Jesus offers us becomes wonderful and precious. Hiding sin under different names doesn't do anyone any favors. Call it sin – horrific, death-dealing, soul-killing sin – and you are on the road to recovery. Like the addict can kick the habit when they see the depths of what their cravings are doing to them, we can turn from sin if we are truthful about what it is and what it does to our souls.

And that's the turning point to our final thing to do today: *let's adore Jesus for His gift of freedom*. Because of Jesus, we are no longer under the curse of sin and death, and we are not bound to the unyielding, unforgiving nature of the law. After nine months on the front lines at the 38th parallel, Korean War veteran Howard Osterkamp was credited with coining the phrase, "All gave some; some gave all." This weekend, we honor those who gave their lives so that we might have earthly freedom.

If anyone exemplifies that phrase, it's Jesus. Not a moment of His time on Earth was spent doing His own will, but instead He completely and utterly followed the will of His Father, even to death on a cross. He gave all His glory, power, and majesty away so we would be saved from our sin. The mirror of the law is still there, but now, when Christians look into that mirror, instead of seeing condemnation, we see the reflection of Christ. We are united with Him, and because we belong to Him, His face is the face in the mirror. Free of the law that only pointed out our sin and weakness, we can look deeply into that mirror and see the face of our Savior.

And when we look on Him, we want to become more like every day so the reflection in the mirror proves to be true. If you trust in Christ, you do not need to be scared of the eternal damnation of breaking the law any more – instead, follow the moral laws God gave us to please Him who saves us. And when we fail to follow, as Jesus' best friend John writes in his first letter, "If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One."

Go in peace today to love and serve the Lord in freedom, acknowledging your sin, knowing your Savior, and resting in His truth and love.