

Sermon 57: The law and sin

OUTLINE

The law defines sin
The law suggests sin
The law condemns sin
The law is perfect and the problem lies with us

INTRODUCTION

Paul is a person who we have gotten to know as we have studied the book of Acts. He appeared on the scene at the stoning of Stephen, was revealed as a Pharisee and a zealot who was intent on persecuting the church. Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus and Paul went from someone who destroyed the church to being the point man in the mission to the Gentiles. We followed him through three mission trips and watched how he preached the Gospel to different audiences and endured suffering for the sake of the church. We have a few insights into Paul's pre-Christian days where he tells us something about himself in the various testimonies that he gives. Acts 22:3, 'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day.' Acts 26:5, '...according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee.' But here in Romans 7 Paul opens his autobiography and reveals some of God's inner dealings with his soul through the law. Paul pulls these pages from his life to continue his clarifying argument about the place of the law. He wants to speak against the law saying that it is not given to save or sanctify us; but for the law he wants to emphasize that it is perfect and that it exposes our sinfulness. In fact it is on account of the law's perfection and the law's purpose in exposing and defining sin that when it is applied to us as sinners we see that it is impossible that the law can either save or sanctify us. Paul is going to speak to us about how the law comes to us when we are oblivious to our sin and danger, it will offer itself to us as a way of life that we will attempt; but the harder we try the more we fail, and the law gets abused by our sinfulness in the process. This all ends with us totally exposed as sinners who use God's holiest things for selfish purposes, who are trapped and unable to change and the pronouncement of death over us. A perfection introduction for the Gospel where Christ is our only true hope for righteousness before a holy God.

We will track with Paul through four main thoughts that relate to the law, how the law defines sin, suggests sin, condemns sin and is holy exposing the fault being with us.

The law defines sin

Paul begins by anticipating an objection to his statements about the law, the latest being in v5 that the law arouses our sinful passions. He starts by negating the shallow conclusions that some might draw from his statements, 'What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means!' Some might think that Paul is suggesting that the law is somehow sinful

because it arouses our sinful passions, this is the very point that Paul wants to clarify and starts by denying that this is the conclusion. He begins by defending that law's holiness by showing that it is the straight line that shows up the crooked line of sin, it defines sin, 'Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.' Although the law of God has been written on every heart, we are all poor plagiarists who write over God's original innovating it to suite ourselves. So then, when the law is spoken to us it washes off our graffiti and shows us the truth of God's standard and how far short we have fallen from it.

Paul in particular felt the law define his sins beginning with the 10th Commandment, 'Thou shalt not covet.' In this example there is a very important lesson. Think for a moment on Paul's upbringing, he was a good Jewish boy, brought up to memorise the law. He knew all ten of the commandments, but why is it that it is the tenth commandment that caught him out. Well, given the criticisms of the religion of the Jews in the first century that Jesus gives we understand that the law was handled only very superficially. External observance the extent of the lawkeeping that was trusted in to make one righteous enough to get into heaven. We see that Jesus has to clarify that the law not only forbids murder, but hatred too; not only adultery but lust in the heart. And when we see Jesus preaching the law to the rich young ruler we see that the young man on account of a very shallow reading of the law thought that he had kept the law perfectly since he was a youth. We see all sorts of rationalizations by the Pharisees justifying lying and stealing and the neglecting one's duties to one's parents. This is why the 10th Commandment is so important. Of all the commandments it reminds us that God is not merely concerned with external behaviour but with inward purity too. Not only of the hands and mouth, but even to the thoughts of the heart. For a good Jewish boy who would never worship any other God, who never pronounced the name of God, who religiously over-observed the Sabbath so as not to break it, who has been conservative and respectful towards his parents, who had never murdered *an innocent man*, who had never committed adultery, stolen another's possessions, or lied about someone in court to get them into trouble, it was the tenth commandment that drew attention to his inner life that exposed him as a sinner.

Coveting is the act of wrongful desire and lust. To want something that is wrong. Coveting covers the area of sexual lust, as well as materialism, as well as addresses the area of envy, jealousy, and the various thoughts of bitterness that result from that. Covetousness is the father of criticising God and doubt, was the sin Eve committed when she took the apple, the sin of Cain when Abel was praised and not him, the sin of Saul who envied David, and many other sins. The law do not covet reminds us that God expects purity within, will judge us for wrong thoughts and is always aware of our thoughts at all times, nothing is hidden from Him. We may be able to whitewash ourselves if we apply a shallow interpretation of the law but no matter who you are this is the commandment that gets everyone. This is the law that exposes the sinners that we are. Look at Romans 8:7, 'For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.' The sinful mind of an unbeliever will not and cannot keep this law of not coveting. This is the law that helped Paul see that he was not a good Jew but a vile sinner who deserved to go to hell.

There is much discussion about which stage of Paul's life he is talking about. Some think that he is referring to his childhood, probably around the time when he turned thirteen and had to take personal responsibility for keeping the law for himself. That this awakening to his sin was something that began early, and was part of the reason why he became a Pharisee running from his sin into religion trying to fix by his own efforts what only God could fix, clouding out the guilt with endless duty and good works to try and assuage his conscience. Others have thought that Paul's conscience was more robust than this as he calls himself blameless according to the laws and traditions of the Pharisees, (Phil. 3:6). So Lloyd-Jones has suggested that Paul is describing those three days of blindness when he was praying and fasting, that this time of forced reflection revealed him for who he really was the 10th Commandment being the straw that broke the camel's back. Certainty is impossible, but what is certain is the effect of the law in defining those inner thoughts that we thought were private as evidence against us when we face God on judgement day. Those thoughts that we call natural God calls sin.

In this first verse Paul is merely applying a statement that he made earlier in 3:20, 'For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.' The law defines and exposes sin in us. Through law comes a knowledge of sin. This work of the law awakens us to our poverty, our need, our condemned position before a holy God who will on day judge us according to our deeds. It is for this reason that the evangelists of old have used the law to open the eyes of the self-righteous, the complacent and the religious that they too are sinners in need of Christ as their only hope for righteousness.

The law suggests sin

However, Paul is concerned to explain what he meant when he stated that the law arouses sin. And in verse 8 he gives us some explanation. 'But sin seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law sin lies dead.' The words 'seized an opportunity' are used in Greek to describe a launch pad, a place from which an attack would be waged. Notice that Paul personifies sin indicating that he is referring to sin as a power not merely an act, a principle not merely an isolated incident. Sin, using the law as a launch pad produced all kinds of coveting in Paul. This is the shocking part of what Paul is trying to explain, the very law which was given to make us holy is abused by us, is taken advantage of by sin and becomes means by which sin is not expelled, but rather increased. This idea is made more astonishing by Paul saying that the sin lay dead until the law made sin alive. This certainly does sound like Paul is making an accusation against the law that it is the cause of our sin, how do we understand this?

Have you ever seen a sign for wet paint and touched the paint? Have you ever read a keep off the grass sign and walked on the grass? We have all used the command against something as an invitation to do the exact opposite. This is the nature of our sinfulness. The law said to Paul don't covet from your neighbour, because of Paul's sinfulness (that at this time he was oblivious to) this command, instead of ensuring that Paul did not covet became mental fodder that fed the sin. It acted to stimulate ideas he hadn't been thinking,

it acted as an invitation even though it was a refusal. There was Paul walking along not thinking about wanting to possess what belonged to his neighbour, and as soon as the law forbid him from doing it his sinfulness took occasion to use it as a suggestion and an invitation. In my own case I remember that my interest in becoming a satanist arose from reading a Christian book warning about the dangers of it, all the while giving detailed descriptions of the various beliefs and practices. As I read this book about something so forbidden my sinfulness took the occasion to want everything that was being warned against in the book. It is this backwards phenomenon that the world is blind to. The world cannot see its own sinfulness and thinks that certain things are innocent like sex education in school, or movies that encourage suicide, violence, etc. If you put true information, even in the form of a negative criticism in the hands of a sinner, the sinfulness of our hearts is so great we twist commands into invitations.

So when Paul says that apart from law sin lies dead, what he means is that we think that we are sinless people, that sin is an action that we can avoid and not something that is engrained in our natures to which we are subject and cannot rescue ourselves from.

The law condemns sin

Paul goes on in his biography to show not only how sin awoke through the law, but then how the same law that gave 'life' to rise then turned around and killed him. V9, 'I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.' This death would not have been instant but would have gone something like this. Paul reads the command not to covet and finds his mind doing the very thing it is commanded not to do. He stops doing it and tries to bring the thoughts under control. He finds that the harder he tries not to do it, the more he is thinking about it and ends up thinking things he shouldn't. He makes various attempts to stop the thoughts by avoiding certain people, certain places, certain memories. However, no matter how hard he tries he cannot stop the thoughts from coming. He knows how wrong they are but they are so inviting and they grow into thoughts that he never would have dreamed he was able of thinking. He tries everything, not sleeping, fasting, scripture memorization, good deeds but nothing works the thoughts keep coming and he keeps entertaining them and growing them into epic sagas of terrible deeds. It begins to dawn on Paul that the reason the thoughts keep coming are because they are not induced by the situations he is in, the food he eats, the people he sees, but they arise from his own heart. The sin comes from within him not from without. He begins to see with despairing clarity that he is the source of these terrible thoughts he never knew he would ever dare to think. That he was the sinner and gave rise to the sins, that his own heart was the mother of sin and no matter how hard he tried, the sin would inevitably come. Trying to process this truth as a religious Jew, comparing the horror of his inner life to the whitewashed exterior of his life tortured him and amplified the evil of his heart. Realizing that God had forbidden these thoughts and he kept running to them even in the middle of his most religious activities brought waves of guilt, a terrible certainty of judgement, the naked shame of his sinfulness, the gut wrenching truth of his inability to stop—death! The thin mask of life he thought he was living is pulled back to reveal a man dead in sin.

Then v10 comes along, 'The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.' Can you feel the absolute shock. The law which said do this and you shall live, the law that appeared to be the answer to all of humanities problems, that apparent stairway to heaven that set the Jews apart that had been given by God Himself. It was this very law that turned and bit Paul, the law that promised life for perfection spoke of condemnation for imperfection. The law that portrays God in His perfect holiness when looked into as a mirror is the portrait of the shocking vileness of our sins. Paul was not introduced to sin by an older brother who had friends who did drugs; he did not go to a bad school and move in a bad group of friends, no Paul got his suggestions for sin from the law, his sinful heart didn't need the lifestyle of a gangster to make a sinner of Paul, the pure law of God was fodder enough for our impure hearts to get ideas about sin.

This activity on sins part is spoken of in verse 11, 'For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.' The sin that told Paul he was not a bad person but a good person; the sin that told Paul that he was not like everyone else but that he was able to be righteous before a holy God; that sin which observed a merely external observation of the law ignoring the inward requirements of God; it was that same sin that used the 10th Commandment to indulge an endless world of wrong in the heart, and was finally my cause of death. The same sin that deceived me about my self-righteousness was the same sin that used the law to promote itself, and that is what killed me. The AIDS virus wraps itself in the genetic material of the host camouflaging itself from the body's immune system tricking it into thinking it is part of the host, and then in stealth kills of the immune system until a variety of diseases take one over. Sin is like AIDS, it wears a false disguise and then kills us using the very law it lied to me about, telling me I would be able to keep it. Can you feel the shock that Paul felt? He thought he was good, alive and on his way to heaven; then he realised he was sinful, enslaved, dead and unable to save himself from judgement.

The law is perfect and the problem lies with us

V12 is then put forward as a defence of the law, 'So the law is holy, the commandment is holy and righteous and good.' Some might want to reason that if the law is what kills us then there is something wrong with the law, Paul will not allow for this, and so he defends the purity of the law. He speaks firstly in general about the law, and then about the 10th commandment in particular. He describes it in three ways, holy, righteous and good. Each of these descriptions is very important for those who think evil of the law. The law is holy as God is holy because it outlines the very character of God. In being image bearers we were to fulfil all that the law demanded and fulfil our purpose in reflecting God's own moral character. The law is holy. The law is also righteous, in other words, just. Its demands are right and just. The law is not unreasonable demanding inward perfection as well as outward perfection. The law is righteous in holding us to a perfect morality in our inward lives as well as our outward lives for God cannot cover over sin and lie about it saying that it is not there. The law likewise is good, in other words it benefits us and results in good. The command not to covet protects you from the sin that resides in your neighbour. God commands perfection in our inner lives as well as our outer lives because all sin starts as a

thought. For those in our world today who are worried about crime but fight for no censorship, they are fools who have forgotten the most basic truth about our sinfulness. All sin starts in the heart, and it is just a matter of time before it expresses itself in actions and words.

Paul summarises this first part of his defence of the law in v13, 'Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.' So, is it the law that kills? Paul says no, it is sin that abused the law to produce death in me. And in sin using this weapon to slay me sin revealed itself as the exact opposite of God, something that deserves the opposite of all that God is and all that hell will ultimately be. The truth of our situation is so obvious in this act of law abusing sin we can never ever put our hope in the law or any of our own efforts to save us. After hearing Paul show how the sin in us uses even the law to promote sin can you still argue that we get ourselves into heaven by obeying the law? This is the point of Paul whole case, we can never save ourselves by the law, for even the law merely aggravates sin and produces more sin. If you add pure water to poisoned water you don't get pure water but poisoned water. And if you add the law to a sinner, he will not become a saint but taint the law.

So let me ask you. Have you had that shocking wake-up call that the law you thought you would use to get to heaven with has been turned into a spring board for sin by your perverted heart? If you have never seen that you are poor in spirit and never able to keep the law, then you are still self-deceived like Paul once was. The best thing that can happen to you is that you wake up one day and realise that you are no better than the worst criminal, that you have your opinion of yourself totally destroyed in the embarrassing reality of your own sins; for you to feel utterly trapped and unable to help yourself to be righteous. There is no greater mercy that God could do for you but to crush all your self-respect in this way. For only then would you come to Christ with nothing in your hands and simply cling to that cross for righteous and nothing in yourself.

And for those who have seen their sin and have fled to Christ, are you still looking to Him for your righteousness? We can fall back into our old self-sufficiency, and when we turn back to ourselves for righteousness we will immediately lose all our joy, all our assurance, all our motivation to serve God, for we will once again be confronted with the beast but with no help from God we will merely be overcome again. Give up that old way of living and rejoice in the free, absolutely free provision of Christ for your righteousness.