

Prayers

To God

Heavenly Father, we give You thanks for the way You pour out Your love on us. Come and open our eyes so we may see the evidence of Your love in all that happens to us, especially the way that You help us through our difficulties. Stand beside us, we pray, so we may know Your presence as it touches and affects every part of our lives. All praise to You, heavenly Father; AMEN.

For Self

Pray about the things you have bought recently; clothes, goods, food

Ask the Lord whether you are right to value these things as you do?

Pray for the Lord to guide you as you spend your money and choose what to buy

For others

Pray for young people caught up in drugs and hopelessness

Pray for people of all ages compromised by drink

Pray for those who smoke and will become ill and probably die of cancer

Pray for elderly people who know they have Alzheimer's disease

Meditation

If we hand over all our problems to the Lord,
They are placed in safe and reliable hands;
His love works miracles we never fully see,
Especially when responding to our pleas.

Broken relationships, dominated by fear,
Which drain our emotions and make for despair;
When placed in the hands of Him we most trust,
May be saved even though they seem lost.

All burdens and unresolved problems of life,
And the fear that comes attached to each choice;
When released into Him who is love and compassion
Are set free in the embrace of His peace.

Sadness will overwhelm us if we dwell on the past
And all we have done that was less than the best,
But as we look in His face and confess and repent,
His grace gives forgiveness and rest.

Bible Passage

Romans 7:7-13

⁷ So, what then should we conclude? That the law is sin? Certainly not! Without the Law I had no awareness of sin, and I would not have understood what it means to covet if the Law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' ⁸ But sin, taking the opportunity given by the commandment, created all kinds of covetousness in me. Indeed, sin is dead without the law!

⁹ So in the past I was alive with no law, but when the commandments were given sin came to life ¹⁰ and I died! So the commandments that should have brought me life instead brought death; ¹¹ indeed, sin took the opportunity given by the commandment to deceive me and used it to put me to death. ¹² Now the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. ¹³ So did something good bring me death? Certainly not! Sin used what is good to kill me, so I might know what sin truly is, even using the commandment to produce yet more sin.

Bible study Review

This is not a well known part of Romans. Everyone who tries to understand this letter has the privilege of reading within it some glorious Biblical texts, but passages such as this one seem less than helpful in any explanation of the Gospel today! In a nutshell, Paul argues here that the real enemy of humanity is sin, not the truth of God's Law which points out what sin is. Now this may appear an obvious message, but it is surprising how little it is understood even today. I have certainly heard a fair number of Christian people advance the notion that the Laws of the Old Testament have no purpose today, and we must conclude from this scripture that it does. Its [purpose is to point out the enemy of humanity, which is sin. We should fight sin, not the Old Testament Scriptures!

As we have already seen, Paul was dogged by the same question throughout his ministry, and it crops up time and time again. Christians wanted to know whether what the Old Testament said, including the 'Law' was indeed 'Scripture' and to be obeyed. They knew about salvation by grace but because of controversies with Jews were split over the meaning of the Law and whether it should be obeyed. Some insisted that the Law was a dispensable relic of Judaism, whilst others believed that past revelation was still valid because God was unchanging. Moreover this is not the first time on Romans we have dealt with this matter; it has been in the background almost throughout the letter.

In chapters 4 and 5, Paul has already explained that the Law is part of God's revelation and must be retained (see 4:15, 5:12-15). In addition, our studies have revealed that when Paul writes about the law, he means God's moral law, not the ritual laws of Judaism, which he believes are fulfilled in Christ. This is important, and all Christians should remember this when reading the Old Testament, for it is taught not just by Paul in Romans, but by Jesus as well (see Matthew 5,6). Yet it seems that Paul repeats the point here, and we must delve more deeply into the passage to find out why.

To begin with, verse 7 and 8 give a simple example of how the Law exposes sin. Speaking personally, he explains that he would not have known that 'to covet' was a sin unless the Ten Commandments said so (7:7). Of course, this is an example of one Law, but the same can be said of others, such as murder, adultery and false witness; many people do not naturally think of these things as sin, and this is why we need God's commandments and moral law set out in Scripture.

Nevertheless, Paul may have chosen covetousness purposefully. Whilst the 10 commandments ban a set number of sinful deeds, Covetousness is an attitude of the heart, and therefore exposes a considerable number of sins. People often think it not harmful to want what other people have; they say it is not harmful to merely desire something, what sin is there in that? However, God's law says that it is harmful because it lies at the heart of many sins such as greed, avarice and a multitude of personal desires. Today, advertising feeds off people's covetous desires and encourages greed, and such sin can be the source of much evil. The trouble with such sin is precisely what Paul says here, and this is that it remains unrecognised for what it is until revealed by God's Law (7:8).

Paul continues to make his points about sin and the law speaking personally, but as we read on, the passage seems strange. Surprisingly, Paul says this; '*in the past, I was alive with no law, but when the commandment were given, sin came to life and I died*' (7:9,10), but what does it mean for Paul to describe himself as '*alive with no law*'? There are two possible explanations, and both lead to the same conclusion. The first is that Paul was aware of the law but only understood its full meaning after Christ appeared to him on the Damascus Road. The second is that Paul is writing here as if identifying personally with all who do not know God. Whichever explanation you think is most feasible, Paul's point remains the same. God's Law is holy because it is His Law (7:12); the real enemy is sin, not the Law which reveals it. Law does not bring death, sin does.

As we leave this passage we should note something important. Paul may not have been writing in this personal way merely for effect. For in the rest of chapter 7, he examines his own heart. He said earlier in the letter that all are under the power of sin (3:9f.), so to ensure that he does not sound hypocritical, he goes on to reveal his own battles with sin (7:14-25). Paul needed God's constant help in the battle against sin, and we will read more about this tomorrow.

Going Deeper

An example from the Law

Paul was most certainly worried that people would misinterpret his teaching and conclude that because 'grace' replaces 'law' (6:14), law is somehow irrelevant, or wrong, or misleading of humanity. So, at the beginning and after stating his clear intent, Paul launches into an example to illustrate his absolute denial that the 'law is sin'. He chose the tenth law of the Ten Commandments 'you shall not covet ...'. In the passages of Exodus (Ex 20:17) and Deuteronomy (Deut 5:21) which quote this law, some examples are given of what it means to be covetous; they list a desire for houses, people (implying sexual desire), animals and possessions, and anything which 'belongs to a neighbour'.

Some people object to this example, saying that simply 'wanting' something belonging to someone else is not a sin, and suggest that Paul was skating on thin ice by arguing that this

law identifies a real evil in the world. However, there is plenty of documentary evidence in Jewish texts that as far back as we can go in Israelite history, the tenth commandment was regarded as summarising all the 'moral' laws of the famous Ten Commandments. Just as Jesus argued that inner attitudes lay behind evils such as murder and adultery (Matt 5:21-30), the Jewish teachers taught that an inner attitude of covetousness was the motive for the evils of murder, adultery, stealing, false witness, and the lack of respect for parents (the other 'moral' laws of the Ten Commandments).

Fascinatingly, Paul writes this passage personally, as we have already seen, and it is worth considering why he should do this. Was it because Paul himself had struggled with covetousness in the past? Certainly, he was raised a strict Pharisee and prided himself on his strict observance of the Law in every respect (see Philippians 3:6). However, even though Paul could point to his faultless 'doing' of the law before he became a Christian, we do well to wonder whether his young and growing heart struggled with the desires of youth for what he could not have, even as a Pharisee raised amongst other Jews. This may appear to be only a casual possibility, but when we read on into the second half of chapter 7 of Romans, the intensity of the inner spiritual struggle Paul talks about there (7:14-25) is highly suggestive of adolescent personal struggles about identity. Neither do we wrong Paul by analysing the passage in this way. Clearly, there was something in his own life that led him to say 'I would not have come to know what it means to covet unless ...' (7:7) So I conclude that Paul was indeed revealing something of his personal experience in this passage, as he fought to defend 'the law' and identify 'sin' as the real villain in the world.

Sin, the villain

As far as Paul was concerned, if the Laws of Moses said something was wrong, then it was a 'sin'. Also, if the natural moral laws of the created world indicated that something was wrong, then that too was a 'sin'; for an example, see chapter 1:24-32 where he identified devious sexual practice and all manner of wickedness as being against natural law and justice, and therefore wrong. However, at the beginning of verse 9, Paul indicates that 'without the law, I was once alive' (7:9), which can only mean that he was thinking of some instance in which it was not possible to know the law (of whatever kind), and therefore sin was irrelevant. We are sure this is what he means, because he goes on 'but when the commandment came to life, sin came to life and I died ...'

At a purely general level, this is easy enough to understand; we do not know what sin is unless there is some law somewhere that declares whatever it is to be wrong, and that is the role that law plays. However, a little more detective work is necessary. By using the word 'commandment', Paul gives away that he is still talking about covetousness, because a 'commandment' means 'one specific law', and covetousness is the one Paul is talking about (and he is not speaking generally). I suggest that Paul is talking about the natural way in which a child is ignorant of something until taught it. He did not know what it was to 'covet' until at some point in his early years he was taught the 'Ten Commandments'.

Sin, the deceiver

The next mystery is why Paul then speaks very personally of this sin coming to life in him, deceiving him and causing his 'death' (7:10,11). Again, the general point is clear enough and has been made throughout the letter, which is that sin causes death. This is even helped by the way that Paul uses the very word 'deception' that is used from the Old Testament to the New to describe the way that Eve was tempted by the serpent, causing Adam to sin. However,

thinking more openly, Paul's own spiritual 'death' was something he would have associated with becoming a Christian, perhaps his famous conversion after being thrown to the ground on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1-9) or his consequent 'blindness' from which he was released by the infilling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:10-19), or his being baptised at some later date (which we do not know). Putting all this together, we are left wondering whether Paul, as a zealous Pharisee 'breathing threats ... against the disciples' (Acts 9:1) was driven by a covetous jealous rage at the greater zeal, loyalty, devotion and success of the early Christian community which he so vigorously persecuted.

Whether this is true is unknown, but the sum of evidence in this passage asks us to consider it, and I certainly did not expect to find this conclusion when commencing the study of this passage today. I also pass on my own conclusion that having read many books on this passage, very few scholars can show any agreement whatsoever about its meaning apart from the general theme, which as I have already explained, is clear enough. I think it worth considering that the way Paul explains sin and the law in this passage is as much a matter of his own experience as to do with any need to explain deeper theological matters not explained elsewhere.

Paul and the personal nature of sin

The last verse of this passage continues to emphasise that the law, whether of Moses or the natural world is not what brings death. Paul paints a picture of sin throughout as if it is a character, working, doing and achieving objectives. From the beginning of his letter, Paul has identified the chief characteristic of sin as an ability to 'self-replicate' (see 1:24-32, 6:15-23) and entrap a person, making it ever more difficult to turn away from. We could call it characteristically, an addiction. And in addition, sin is one word that Scripture frequently reminds us covers everything from 'missing the mark' in an entirely understandable human manner, to deliberate and self-conscious rebellion against God. We cannot pick and choose our 'sins' when attempting to interpret this passage, as if one human experience is more 'sinful' than another. Paul argues from his own experience that one deviance from the law of God (either from Moses or the natural order), is enough to pull us away from the God who loves us, and this, ultimately, is death. Sin is the 'boundless sinner', the enemy to be fought throughout life. Law reveals sin, and must be used as such and as an agent of God's purposes.

Application

Discipleship issues

Christians and 'the Law'

The strong message of this passage is that the Law has a place within Christian faith, by which we mean God's moral law revealed both in nature and in the Old Testament. The purpose of all Law is to reveal to us what is right and wrong, and we are remiss if we ignore it. Certainly, God's Law does not win our salvation, for we are 'under grace', and not under the law, but as I have said above, the law teaches us about sin so we might better guard against it. As such, it is imperative that we know God's moral laws and stick close to them.

People often comment to me that the Bible does not give us the precise instructions we want to live Christian lives today or organise the church. I imagine they would like sets of rules about committee agendas, or something similar, together with instructions about what to do in worship

or how to do evangelism, and also details about marital relationships, courtship and sex, as well as the answer to moral dilemmas such as abortion and 'life' issues. In truth, God has given us guidelines about living and moral regulations within the law, and few people bother to read these and understand the godly principles on which they work. It is possible to work through to find answers to many of life's moral dilemmas if we apply what God has already given.

Guidance about law within the Old Testament

The scriptures we can use are the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20, Deut 5), and also Leviticus 19, the famous 'moral law' of the Old Testament. In addition, we can find amazingly important legal principles in Exodus 21-23, and much more. The Bible also contains stories about people's lives, and these tell us a great deal about how to handle right and wrong within the unfolding drama of life (the stories of Jacob, David, Job, or Daniel, for example). It also has the invaluable teaching of Jesus, which does not depart from the principles of God's revelation already given in the Old Testament, but adds to it and interprets it. And I have not even mentioned the guidance of the Prophets, or the immense value of Biblical wisdom ... !

All these aids are found in God's Word to help us fight our true enemy sin. Moreover, when we know what sin is, we must know exactly how to deal with it, by repentance, and by trusting in Jesus for forgiveness and salvation. When we preach the Gospel, we must both explain sin and its solution to those who are desperate for an answer. I believe there are many such people in the world today.

Ideas for what to do

- Have a look at some of the passages mentioned in this study as examples of relevant moral Law in the Old Testament (Exodus 20-23, Leviticus 19). What do these passages say to you? Do they challenge you to reconsider any part of your life? If so, talk about this with a Christian friend, and seek to repent and bring the matter before the Lord.
- Over several days, spend time in silence before the Lord, and let Him speak to you about sin and its power in your life

Questions for groups

1. *Discuss examples from everyday life of how 'laws' inform us of the nature of sin, and how the grace of God can overcome the consequences of sin.*
2. *Which laws or sins have affected you deeply within your own personal development?*
3. *Do you feel that the church respects the laws of God or rejects them?*

Final Prayer

Wonderful Lord; You are a gracious God who goes ahead of us to mark out our way, and provide us with the spiritual and physical means to walk the path before us. Encourage us through Your presence, and strengthen us by Your Spirit for everything we face in the coming days; through Jesus Christ; AMEN