

## **Romans (32): The Law and Sin**

### **Introduction:**

Today we will learn more clearly the role that God has for His law in exposing and condemning sin to those under His law. Last Lord's Day we considered the fact that the true believer in Jesus Christ was delivered from his former relationship with God's law so that he could be joined in a saving relationship with God's Son, Jesus Christ. Just as when a wife survives the death of her husband so that she is then legitimately free to marry another man, so the believer "died" with respect to the law through his union with his Savior in His death and resurrection, so now the believer is joined to Jesus Christ in a new and insoluble relationship. The law had formerly been the "obstacle" preventing the believer from knowing Jesus Christ. But through the wisdom and work of God in Christ, that former role of the law had come to an end.

In speaking of God's law as having condemned people by causing them to bring forth fruit unto death (7:5) and as having prevented people from joining themselves to Jesus Christ, one might draw the wrong conclusion that there was something inherently defective, even sinful about the law itself. Paul next demonstrates that this would be a wrong conclusion, for God had a use for His law in bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ. This is what we find in this next paragraph that we desire to examine, **Romans 7:7-12**, which reads as follows:

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."<sup>8</sup> But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.<sup>9</sup> I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.<sup>10</sup> The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.<sup>11</sup> For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.<sup>12</sup> So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

Here we see Paul using a rhetorical question once again to begin his argument.<sup>1</sup> ***"What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin."*** Paul corrects the possible wrong conclusion that there was something defective about God's law. He asked the question, "What then shall we say? That the law is sin?" One might think that Paul would use the adjective "sinful" rather than the noun, "sin." Paul used the word, "sin", to intensify the thought.<sup>2</sup>

Paul not only saw the law to be blameless to the charge, but he stated that the law had served an indispensable role in revealing to Paul his sinfulness and his need of salvation. Here Paul stated specifically that apart from the law he would not have known sin.

One of the effects of sin is that it renders a person unable to detect and identify the sin that is in him. Sin also renders a sinner unable to see the gravity of the sin before God. When we sin, we tend to minimize its evil and perhaps even deny its presence. God has to teach us what it is we have done. He then needs to just about drag a confession from us, for we will avoid facing the fact of it or the guilt of it. But God's law reveals to us that sin is sin and it also reveals to us the gravity of sin. God's law teaches us what sin deserves before God who gave His law. Paul had declared that this was so earlier in his epistle.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 3:9, 27; 6:1, 15; 7:7.

<sup>2</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1959), p. 249.

Paul had written, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). Paul himself would not have known of his sinfulness had it not been for the law of God.

The function of the law revealing sin is one of three uses for which God intended to use His law. We have stated this on a number of occasions in the past, but it bears repeating in our hearing.<sup>3</sup> Here is the statement on this subject from *The New Reformation Study Bible*:

Scripture shows that God intends His law to function in three ways, which Calvin crystallized in classic form for the church’s benefit as the law’s threefold use.

Its first function is to be a mirror reflecting to us both the perfect righteousness of God and our own sinfulness and shortcomings. As Augustine wrote, “the law bids us, as we try to fulfill its requirements, and become wearied in our weakness under it, to know how to ask the help of grace.” The law is meant to give knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20; 4:15; 5:13; 7:7-11), and by showing us our need of pardon and our danger of damnation to lead us in repentance and faith in Christ (Gal. 3:19-24).

A second function, the “civil use,” is to restrain evil. Though the law cannot change the heart, it can to some extent inhibit lawlessness by its threats of judgment, especially when backed by a civil code that administers punishment to proven offenses (Deut. 13:6-11; 19:16-21; Rom. 13:3, 4). Thus it secures civil order, and serves to protect the righteous from the unjust.

Its third function is to guide the regenerate (i.e. true Christians) into the good works that God has planned for them (Eph. 2:10). The law tells God’s children what will please their heavenly Father. It could be called their family code. Christ was speaking of this third use of the law when He said that those who become His disciples must be taught to do all that He had commanded (Matt. 28:20), and that obedience to His commands will prove the reality of one’s love for Him (John 14:15). The Christian is free from the law as a system of salvation (Rom. 6:14; 7:4, 6; 1 Cor. 9:20; Gal. 2:15-19; 3:25), but is “under law toward Christ” as a rule of life (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2).<sup>4</sup>

Here in Romans 7:7 it is clear that Paul was referencing the first use of the law. God had given His law so that we might know “our own sinfulness and shortcomings.”

In the latter portion of Romans 7:7 Paul speaks of his personal experience of having God’s law reveal his sin to him. He wrote, “**For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’**” Here Paul references the tenth commandment. The Ten Commandments, or the Decalogue, as it is sometimes called, are the summary of God’s law. One could say that The Ten Commandments is God’s law. When God gave His law to Moses on Mount Sinai it was in the form of the Ten Commandments. God gave to Moses many other laws; there were a total of **613 laws** given in the Old Testament. But all of these laws should be understood as an application of God’s Ten Commandments to the nation of Israel as the covenant people of God. The puritan, **Thomas Watson**, wrote a classic book entitled, *The Ten Commandments*. He wrote of the Ten Commandments being the summary of all of God’s law.

The Ten Commandments are the heads of all the duties of the law largely contained in the whole Bible. They are the text which Christ himself, the prophets, and apostles expounded. They comprehend the whole duty of man (cf. Ecc. 12:3). There is nothing that God requires but may be reduced to one of these commandments. So faith is a duty of the first command, as it obliges men to believe whatever God reveals. The first commandment concerns the object of worship, requiring us to know and acknowledge God to be the true God, and our God, and to worship and glorify Him as such, in heart and life. The second relates to the means of worship, requiring us to receive, observe, and keep pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in His

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<sup>3</sup> We reviewed this important matter on several months ago, on Sunday, November 25, 2012e

<sup>4</sup> *The Reformation Study Bible* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), p. 259.

word. The third respects the holy and reverent use of God's names, titles, attributes, ordinances, words, and works. The fourth requires us to sanctify the Sabbath, that day which He hath set apart for His own worship and service. The fifth relates to the duties we owe to one another in our several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors, or equals. The sixth requires the preservation of our own life and that of others. The seventh respects the preservation of our own and our neighbor's chastity, in heart, speech, and behavior. The eighth relates to the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others. The ninth requires the maintaining and promoting truth between man and man, especially in witness bearing. And the tenth requires us to be contented with our own condition, and to have a right and charitable frame of spirit toward our neighbor and all that is his. And every commandment forbids whatever is opposite to or inconsistent with what it requires.<sup>5</sup>

God used the tenth commandment to convict Paul of his sin. "You shall not covet." Apparently Paul had come to the place that he was not content with the manner in which God had governed his life. He was not content with what God had given to him. He was not happy with what God had not given to him.

Even after Paul had come to faith in Jesus Christ, it had taken him sometime to grow in knowledge and in holiness respecting this matter of covetousness. This is suggested in his words of gratefulness expressed to the church at Philippi:

<sup>10</sup>I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. <sup>11</sup>Not that I am speaking of being in need, ***for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.*** <sup>12</sup>I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, ***I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.*** <sup>13</sup> I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Phi 4:1 ESV)

Covetousness is a very great sin. It insults God, for it is a rejection of His goodness. It is a charge of failure of God to care for and provide for His people. Covetousness flows forth from the heart of a person who thinks that he deserves something more or something better than what God has given to him. It is a charge of mismanagement leveled against God. It is a claim of the individual that reflects terrible pride, arrogance, and self-righteousness. Paul had thought himself to have been "blameless" until the Holy Spirit began to apply the tenth commandment to his soul. It then put Saul in the ashes, humble and contrite before the Lord.

**Thomas Watson** (17<sup>th</sup> c) wrote of how to determine when one is given over to covetousness:

For a more full answer to the question, 'What is it to covet?' I shall show in six particulars, when a man may be said to be given to covetousness:

(1) When his thoughts are wholly taken up with the world. A good man's thoughts are in heaven; he is thinking of Christ's love and eternal recompense. 'When I awake I am still with thee,' that is, in divine contemplation (Psa. 139: 18). A covetous man's thoughts are in the world; his mind is wholly taken up with it; he can think of nothing but his shop or farm. The fancy is a mint-house, and most of the thoughts in a covetous man's mind are worldly. He is always plotting and projecting about the things of this life; like a virgin whose thoughts all centre upon her suitor.

(2) A man may be said to be given to covetousness, when he takes more pains for getting earth than for getting heaven. He will turn every stone, break his sleep, take many a weary step for the world; but will take no pains for Christ or heaven. After the Gauls, who were an ancient people of France, had tasted the sweet wine of the Italian grape, they inquired after the country, and never rested till

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<sup>5</sup> Boston, *Works of Thomas Boston*, vol. 2, p. 69. I cited this quotation back in May of 2011.

they had arrived at it; so a covetous man, having had a relish of the world, pursues after it, and never ceases till he has got it; but he neglects the things of eternity. He would be content if salvation were to drop into his mouth, as a ripe fig into the mouth of the eater (Nahum 3: 12); but he is loath to put himself to too much sweat or trouble to obtain Christ or salvation. He hunts for the world, he wishes only for heaven.

(3) A man may be said to be given to covetousness, when all his discourse is about the world. ‘He that is of the earth, speaketh of the earth’ (John 3: 31). It is a sign of godliness to be speaking of heaven, to have the tongue turned to the language of Canaan. ‘The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious;’ he speaks as if he had been already in heaven (Eccl. 10:12). So it is a sign of a man given to covetousness to speak always of secular things, of his wares and drugs. A covetous man's breath, like a dying man's, smells strong of the earth. As it was said to Peter, ‘Thy speech betrayed thee’ (that he was Christ's disciple); so a covetous man's speech betrays him (Matt. 26: 73). He is like the fish in the gospel, which had a piece of money in its mouth (Matt. 17: 27). *Verba sunt speculum mentis*. Bernard. ‘The words are the looking-glass of the heart,’ they show what is within. *Ex abundantia cordis* [From the abundance of the heart].

(4) A man is given to covetousness when he so sets his heart upon worldly things, that for the love of them, he will part with heavenly; for the ‘wedge of gold,’ he will part with the ‘pearl of price.’ When Christ said to the young man in the gospel, ‘Sell all, and come and follow me;’ *abiit tristis*, ‘he went away sorrowful’ (Matt. 19:22). He would rather part with Christ than with all his earthly possessions. Cardinal Bourbon said, he would forego his part in paradise, if he might keep his cardinalship in Paris. When it comes to the critical point that men must either relinquish their estate or Christ, and they will rather part with Christ and a good conscience than with their estate, it is a clear case that they are possessed with the demon of covetousness.

(5) A man is given to covetousness when he overloads himself with worldly business. He has many irons in the fire; he is in this sense a pluralist; he takes so much business upon him, that he cannot find time to serve God; he has scarce time to eat his meat, but no time to pray. When a man overcharges himself with the world, and as Martha, cumpers himself about many things, that he cannot have time for his soul, he is under the power of covetousness.

(6) He is given to covetousness whose heart is so set upon the world, that, to get it, he cares not what unlawful means he uses. He will have the world *per fas et nefas* [by fair means or foul]; he will wrong and defraud, and raise his estate upon the ruins of another. ‘The balances of deceit are in his hand, he loveth to oppress.... Ephraim said, ‘Yet I am become rich.’ (Hos. 12: 7f).<sup>6</sup>

Let us return to our text. Paul wrote, “What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” We next read Paul's testimony of what effect God's law had upon his life.

***But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. (7:8)***

By his use of the word “sin”, Paul was not speaking of sin as an act, as a transgression, but rather he is describing his sinfulness. Here Paul describes ***the principle of sin*** that resided in him, what is commonly referred to as his ***sin nature***. Here Paul said that sin produced in him all kinds of covetousness. But his sinful nature had help. The opportunity for sin to produce sins in Paul came “through the commandment.” Here we see that the law of God when it comes into contact with an unconverted sinner, results in more sins committed than had he not come to the knowledge of God's law.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), pp. 174-176.

He said that “apart from the law, sin lies dead.” Sin was present, but was dormant, as it were. But then the law came along and it aroused sin from its death state and came alive in Paul, resulting in him committing many acts of sins of covetousness.

Prior to the process here delineated the sinful principle in the apostle was inactive. Then the commandment “Thou shall not covet” entered into his consciousness—it came home with power and authority. Sin then was aroused to activity. It was no longer dead. And it took occasion to stir up all manner of covetous lust. It did this through the instrumentality of the commandment; the sinful principle was aroused to all manner of desire contrary to the commandment through the commandment itself.<sup>7</sup>

Paul does not say that the law caused him to sin. Sin caused him to sin.

The law has become an ally of sin, for coveting would not have become known to him without the commandment (v. 7b). Yet it was sin (not the command itself) that produced all sorts of coveting (v. 80) by employing the commandment as an outpost for the attack.<sup>8</sup>

This explains why some people when they begin to attend church, perhaps out of an initial desire to improve their life, may find things getting significantly worse. They are under the law of God for they are not yet “in Christ” who alone delivers the guilty sinner from the damning sentence of the law. But the one who has not this understanding begins to attend church, perhaps make some efforts to overcome some sins of which he has been made aware, but he finds himself sinning more frequently and perhaps more egregiously. But this is commonly the process through which God brings him to true salvation in Jesus Christ.

Paul went on to write in **verse 9**, “*I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.*”<sup>9</sup> When Paul says that he was once alive apart from the law, we might ask when was this the case? For we know from his own testimony that he had been born into a Jewish family and had been under the law from birth. In one place he had declared that he had been circumcised the eight day from his birth.

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee... (Phi. 3:4f)

I understand Paul to be saying that before he had come to Christ in repentance and faith on the road to Damascus, that there was a time when he had been a zealous adherent to the law of Moses, which would have characterized most of his life, but then the Holy Spirit had used the law to convict Paul of his sin, bringing a realization of his own spiritual deadness before God. And so, when Paul wrote, “I was once alive apart from the law”, he was saying that he had thought that he had been alive. He had assumed

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<sup>7</sup> Murray, pp. 250f.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Academic, 1998), p. 357.

<sup>9</sup> It is my understanding that Paul was speaking here with the pronoun “I” with the intention to describe an autobiographical experience. It should be noted, however, that among commentators there are views that believe Paul’s use of “I” should not be seen as autobiographical, but rather it was a rhetorical device in which Paul was speaking of another entity. The options include (1) that Paul was speak of himself in solidarity with the nation of Israel and what had happened after God had given His law on Mount Sinai and the subsequent history of Israel’s decline and coming under God’s judgment; (2) that Paul was speaking of the experience of Adam in the Garden of Eden and how he “died” after Eve had been “deceived” and led him to sin. For extensive discussions of these issues see Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 424-431; and Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Academic, 1998), pp. 359-365.

all was well between him and God and that he was “living” before God. But when he came to understand the true meaning and implication of the law of God, he became convicted of his sin, and became more and more aware of his sin, until he finally had to acknowledge he was actually dead, and that he was in need of new life through Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Paul became keenly aware of his true relationship with God through the law. We read in **verse 10**, **“The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.”** God had promised His people that if they ordered their lives according to His law, that He would bless them with life. God gave many glorious promises to His people.<sup>11</sup> But if they were to live in rebellion to God’s laws, then the curse of God would come upon them. Paul had always viewed the law of God as assuring to him that he would live before God. But when the sin that was in him was aroused by the law, he saw that the law condemned him before God. The sentence of death was upon him.

In **verse 11** Paul spoke of the subtle manner in which his sin had deceived him. Sin, using God’s law, sentenced him to death. **“For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.”**

Paul then draws his conclusion that the law was not to be blamed for his failure. It was his sin that brought about his ruin. He argues that the fact that God’s law performed this work of exposing and condemning him in his sin proved that the law itself was to be commended. We read in **verse 12**, **“So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”** The law of God is a reflection of God’s holy nature. It is just in all of its commandments and in the penalties that it pronounces upon transgressors. The law of God is a reflection of God’s goodness.

What we see reflected in Paul’s words here in Romans 7:7-12 is what life is like before God while relating to God under **a covenant of works**. We have spoken of this before, but here we can apply what we know respecting God’s dealings with mankind and what Paul encountered in his life.

When God enters a relationship with people, He does so on the basis of covenant. **A covenant is an agreement between two parties upon which a relationship is established and maintained.** God initiates His covenant. He comes and sets forth the terms. With respect to people, God has related to mankind based on **two types of covenants**. The first is generally called and described as **the covenant of works**.

### 1. The covenant of works

When God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden, He established a relationship with them, a relationship based upon the terms of a covenant which He established with them. This first covenant has been commonly called, “the covenant of works”, even though that expression is not itself found in Scripture. Nevertheless, the term, covenant of works, reflects the nature and terms of God’s dealings with His creatures. It was a covenant in which God promised Adam and Eve that **they would receive eternal life based upon their perfect compliance, or obedience, to His law**. We read in Genesis 2:16f, “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’” God had promised life to them for keeping His law; He promised death to them, if they broke His law. Of course Adam and Eve broke God’s law, and in doing so, they broke the covenant of works that God had established with them and the human race through them. Our confession of faith describes this covenant of works and our parents breaking it.

Although God created man upright and perfect, and gave him a righteous law, which had been unto life had he kept it, and threatened death upon the breach thereof, yet he did not long abide in this honour; Satan using the subtlety of the serpent to subdue Eve, then by her seducing Adam, who,

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<sup>10</sup> One could say that this was God’s intention of giving His law to Israel. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:1ff.

<sup>11</sup> These are given detail in Deuteronomy 28

without any compulsion, did willfully transgress the law of their creation, and the command given unto them, in eating the forbidden fruit, which God was pleased, according to his wise and holy counsel to permit, having purposed to order it to his own glory.

Our first parents, by this sin, fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and we in them whereby death came upon all: all becoming dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body.

They being the root, and by God's appointment, standing in the room and stead of all mankind, the guilt of the sin was imputed, and corrupted nature conveyed, to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation, being now conceived in sin, and by nature children of wrath, the servants of sin, the subjects of death, and all other miseries, spiritual, temporal, and eternal, unless the Lord Jesus set them free.<sup>12</sup>

When Adam and Eve broke the covenant of works, the covenant of works did not cease to have authority over the human race. Every person born into this world has been born under the covenant of works that God had established with our first parents. As human beings, we are born into this world under the penalty of death for having violated the covenant of works. Our obligation to keep God's law abides. We were all born under the covenant of works, whereby God demands and holds us accountable to keep His law perfectly throughout our lives, even though we know that this is an impossible task due to our sinful condition. The result is that the law of God condemns us in our sin. Guilty sinners cannot be true and faithful to keep the covenant of works.

## **2. The covenant of grace**

Yet thankfully, God has made another covenant whereby we may be saved. This is commonly called "the covenant of grace." It is also described succinctly in our confession:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience to him as their creator, yet they could never have attained the reward of life but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

Moreover, man having brought himself under the curse of the law by his fall, it pleased the Lord to make a covenant of grace, wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.

This covenant is revealed in the gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the seed of the woman, and afterwards by farther steps, until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament; and it is founded in that eternal covenant transaction that was between the Father and the Son about the redemption of the elect; and it is alone by the grace of this covenant that all the posterity of fallen Adam that ever were saved did obtain life and blessed immortality, man being now utterly incapable of acceptance with God upon those terms on which Adam stood in his state of innocency.<sup>13</sup>

And so, God has purposed to save us from the guilt and condemnation of our obligation to keep the covenant of works, by bringing us to enjoy the benefits of the covenant of grace that He instituted through Jesus Christ. Where the first covenant constantly stirred up the presence and guilt of our sin, the covenant of grace speaks peace to us, in that it promises us forgiveness of our sin and therefore peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>12</sup> Article 6, The Baptist Confession of 1689

<sup>13</sup> Article 7, The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689

Now there have been many different covenants spoken about in the Bible, but all of these may be classified under the heading of either a covenant of works or the covenant of grace. The most difficult covenant to assess rightly, however, is the covenant that God established with the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, when God entered a covenant relationship with them at Mount Sinai. There has been great debate as to whether one should understand the Mosaic covenant as a covenant of God's grace, or it should be viewed as a covenant of works. We spoke of this in some detail last January, when we were working through the latter portions of Matthew's Gospel.

We saw then that **the Mosaic covenant should be seen first and foremost as an aspect of God's covenant of grace**. This covenant was part of a process whereby God established a relationship with Israel as a nation, after having graciously saved Israel out of bondage in Egypt. God gave His law to His people as the standard by which they were to order their life after entering the Promised Land that God gave them by way of His promise to their Fathers.

The gracious nature of this covenant may be seen when Moses rehearsed the history of God establishing His covenant with Israel, just before the people entered the Promised Land. I have emboldened the words that reveal clearly that God was not dealing with His people according to the merit of their works--according to the covenant of works, but rather because of His dealing with them according to His grace--according to the covenant of grace.

<sup>1</sup>“Hear, O Israel: you are to cross over the Jordan today, to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourselves, cities great and fortified up to heaven, <sup>2</sup>a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim, whom you know, and of whom you have heard it said, ‘Who can stand before the sons of Anak?’

<sup>3</sup>Know therefore today that He who goes over before you as a consuming fire is the LORD your God. He will destroy them and subdue them before you. So you shall drive them out and make them perish quickly, as the LORD has promised you. <sup>4</sup>***Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, ‘It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,’*** whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you. <sup>5</sup>***Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land,*** but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and ***that He may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.*** <sup>6</sup>***Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people.***

<sup>7</sup>Remember and do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness. ***From the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the LORD.*** <sup>8</sup>***Even at Horeb*** (another name for Mount Sinai) ***you provoked the LORD to wrath, and the LORD was so angry with you that He was ready to destroy you.*** <sup>9</sup>When I went up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the LORD made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water. <sup>10</sup>And the LORD gave me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them were all the words that the LORD had spoken with you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly. <sup>11</sup>And ***at the end of forty days and forty nights the LORD gave me the two tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant.*** (Deut. 9:1-11)

When Moses rehearsed God's dealings with His people, forty years after the event at Mount Sinai, he told them that they were not to think that God had dealt with them according to their righteousness (9:4). If God had given them the land based upon their righteousness, then it would have been according to a covenant of works, not of grace. God makes it clear that their possession of the land was not according to a covenant of works (9:5). Rather, God gave them the land according to His grace, fulfilling what He had promised to the Patriarchs--Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (9:5). If God had been dealing with

them according to their works, they would have not been granted entrance (9:6). Their “works” warranted God’s wrath, not favor, for they had been rebellious from when God had taken them out of Egypt until the day that Moses was rehearsing these words before them (9:7-8). Nevertheless, throughout this time of sin and rebellion, they had the two stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments, the covenant graciously granted them by God. God had given His law with them and had established a relationship with them according to His grace.<sup>14</sup>

But though the Mosaic Covenant was a manifestation of *the covenant of grace*, there was also an aspect of *the covenant of works* in the giving of God’s law at Sinai. This is a difficult matter to sort through, but it is important. This aspect of God giving His law to Israel at Sinai has been sometimes called a *republication* of the covenant of works. This was expressed by one recent writer in the following way:

The Westminster divines (those who wrote the Westminster confession and catechism--Lars) also believed that the Mosaic covenant looked back to Adam’s state in the garden. The divines explain, “God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience” (West. Confession, 19.1). They go on to say in the next paragraph, “This law” referring to the law that was given to Adam, “after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness, and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables” (West. Conf., 19.2). In this regard, the divines saw that the law given to Adam was of a piece with what that given to Israel at Sinai. In other words, in some sense, the covenant of works was republished at Sinai. It was not republished, however, as the covenant of works per se, but as a part of the covenant of grace, which pointed to the person and work of Christ.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, even though God had given His law, His Ten Commandments, at Mount Sinai to His people as a manifestation of His grace toward them, instructing them to order their national life in faith and love by keeping God’s commandments, at the same time that law served to show them their need for a Savior as it displayed before them that God would require total and perfect obedience, if the law were seen as a covenant of works. God set forth the law in this form in order...

1. that God by all means might stir up men to perform obedience.
2. that every mouth might be stopped, and all the world might be made subject to the condemnation of God for not performing perfect obedience (Rom. 3:19).
3. that He might manifest man’s sin, and naughtiness (Rom. 3:19-20; 7:7-11).
4. that He might thrust us forward to seek to be restored in the covenant of grace (Gal. 3:22; 5:23).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> That Israel related to God based on a covenant of grace rather than a covenant of works may also be seen in the following ways. *First, the first generation failed to enter the Promised Land due to unbelief.* You will recall that the first generation of Israelites failed to enter the promised land, and then due to God’s judgment, died in the wilderness; God brought the second generation into the land. The reason that first generation forfeited entrance into the land and the victory that was assured to them, is they failed to believe God. We read in Hebrews 4:19, “So we see that *they could not enter in because of unbelief.*” Now it is true they had disobeyed God, but their disobedience was the manifestation of their unbelief, their lack of faith to believe God to secure for them His promises. Faith was what was required, which is a principle of grace, not works. *And secondly, God did not require perfect obedience of Israel to his moral law in order to keep their covenant with God.* The nature of the covenant of works, which involved law-keeping as one’s righteousness, required perfect obedience. But transgressions of the law was the common and frequent experience of the Israelites. God provided a priesthood and a sacrificial system for the occasions when they sinned; therefore, the Mosaic covenant was not of works, but of grace.

<sup>15</sup> Bryan Estelle, J. W. Fesko, and David Van Druenen, *The Law is Not of Faith* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009), pp. 10f.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Lastly, we should understand that although God had given His law (the Ten Commandments) at Mount Sinai as an aspect of His covenant of grace, much of Israel had turned it from a covenant established and maintained by grace into a covenant of works that resulted in damning their souls, thus preparing the nation historically for the coming of their Messiah. Paul later writes of Israel's failure in this regard. **Romans 10:1ff.**

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. <sup>2</sup>For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. <sup>3</sup>For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. <sup>4</sup>For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

May we never fall into the same error as they, viewing God's law as a grounds on which we relate to God, but rather, our relationship is through Jesus Christ alone, who alone kept the law of God as a covenant of works in our place. He thereby obtained eternal life for us on whose well-being He had on His heart when He came into the world. We are in covenant with God based upon Jesus Christ. We who are true believers are "married" to Christ. But we will see further in our passage this was to the end that we could see the righteousness of God reflected in His law manifested through our lives as we live with Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

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### **Herman Bavinck on the Mosaic covenant**

I had come across these words from **Herman Bavinck** which reflects the understanding that the Mosaic Covenant was a manifestation of *the covenant of grace*, as The Westminster Confession asserts, and yet it is also in a manner a republication of *the covenant of works*, in that it set before Israel the need for keeping God's law perfectly, or else the need for sacrifice to prevent their own death. It was designed to lead Israel to look beyond themselves and their system to the Savior who would come and do for them that which they could not do for themselves. Bavinck's words:

This covenant (i.e. the covenant of grace) with the ancestors continues, even when later at Sinai it assumed another form... The covenant with Israel was essentially no other than that with Abraham. Just as God first freely and graciously gave himself as shield and reward to Abraham, apart from any merits of his, to be a God to him and his descendants after him, and on that basis called Abraham to a blameless walk before his face, so also it is God who chose the people of Israel, saved it out of Egypt, united himself with that people, and obligated it to be holy and his own people. The covenant of Mount Sinai is and remains a covenant of grace. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod. 20:2) is the opening statement and foundation of the law, the essence of the covenant of grace...

Just as Abraham, when God allied himself with him, was obligated to "walk before his face," so Israel as a people was similarly admonished by God's covenant to a new obedience. The entire law, which the covenant of grace at Mount Sinai took into its service, is intended to prompt Israel as a people to "walk" in the way of the covenant. It is but an explication of the one statement to Abraham: "Walk before me and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1), and therefore no more a cancelation of the covenant of grace and the foundation of a covenant of works than this word spoken to Abraham. The law of Moses, accordingly, is not antithetical to grace but subservient to it and was also thus understood and praised in every age by pious men and women. But detached from the covenant of grace, it indeed

became a letter that kills, a ministry of condemnation.<sup>17</sup> Another reason why in the time of the Old Testament the covenant of grace took the law into its service was that it might arouse consciousness of sin, increase the felt need for salvation, and reinforce expectation of an even richer revelation of God's grace. It is from that perspective that Paul views especially the Old Testament dispensation of the covenant of grace. He writes that Israel as a minor, placed under the care of the law, had to be led to Christ (Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:23f.; 4:1f) and that in connection sin would be increased and the uselessness of works for justification and the necessity of faith would be understood (Rom. 4:15; 5:20; 7:7f; 8:3; Gal. 3:19). On the one hand, therefore, the law was subservient to the covenant of grace; it was not a covenant of works in disguise and did not intend that humans would obtain justification by their own works. On the other hand, its purpose was to lay the groundwork for a higher and better dispensation of that same covenant of grace to come in the fullness of time. The impossibility of keeping the Sinaitic covenant and meeting the demands of the law made another and better dispensation of the covenant of grace necessary. The eternal covenant of grace was provoked to a higher revelation of itself by the imperfection of the temporary form it had assumed in Israel. Sin increased that grace might abound. Christ could not immediately become human after the fall, and grace could not immediately reveal itself in all its riches. There was a need of preparation and nurture. "It was not fitting for God to become incarnate at the beginning of the human race before sin. For medicine is only given to the sick. Nor was it fitting that God should become incarnate immediately after sin that man, having been humbled by sin, might see his own need of a deliverer. But what had been decreed from eternity occurred in the fullness of time."<sup>18</sup>

Bavinck speaks of the Mosaic law once "detached from the covenant of grace", in other words, *when Israel viewed the Mosaic covenant as a covenant of works rather than of grace, the law became a condemning letter to them.*<sup>19</sup> Once Israel viewed the law, either in their very possession of it as their righteousness, or their keeping it as their righteousness (which Paul addressed in Romans 10:2-4), then it condemned them as a covenant of works.

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<sup>17</sup> This is what Israel had done. Rather than viewing the law as a manifestation of God's grace, a standard by which the people were to order their faith and life as they anticipated the Savior who would come, they regarded the law of Sinai as a covenant of works, believing wrongly, that because they possessed the law God would give them "a pass" in His judgment, or they believed that by the law they could earn their own righteousness that would save their souls from damnation and earn eternal life. Thus the law, which was intended to be a way of life for them, became that which condemned them to death and damnation (cf. Rom. 7:9, 10).

<sup>18</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pp. 220, 222.

<sup>19</sup> This is on contrast to dispensationalism and Lutherans (I think), that view the Mosaic Law as a covenant of works delivered to them by God. Scofield wrote, "The Christian is not under the conditional Mosaic Covenant of works, the law, but under the unconditional New Covenant of grace." C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1909, 1917), p. 95.