

## **Romans (33): The Law and Sin (2)**

### **Introduction**

Let us read the passage under our consideration today, **Romans 7:13-25**.

<sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. <sup>15</sup>For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup>Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. <sup>17</sup>So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup>For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. <sup>19</sup>For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

<sup>20</sup>Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. <sup>21</sup>So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. <sup>22</sup>For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, <sup>23</sup>but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. <sup>24</sup>Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup>Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Rom 7:13-25)

Because it has been several weeks since we have been in this epistle to the church at Rome, it would do us well to refresh our understanding of the flow of the apostle's argument in this portion of his epistle. Of course the subject of the larger context is the believers' sanctification. The blessed Holy Spirit is setting before us through the hand of His apostle how He enables His people to become more like their Savior in holy character. The definition for sanctification that we have cited is that of the 35th question and answer of **The Westminster Shorter Catechism** (1647).

Question #35: What is sanctification? Answer: Sanctification is the work of God's free grace,<sup>1</sup> whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God,<sup>2</sup> and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.<sup>3</sup>

Sanctification begins with the regeneration of the sinner, the believer's initial conversion through repentance from sin toward God and faith in Jesus Christ. God will complete His work of sanctification after this life is finished and Christ returns. Paul had written elsewhere: "Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). But how does God carry on this work of sanctification in His people? This is what we have set before us in Romans 6 and 7, and a good portion of chapter 8.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Thessalonians 2:13. "But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth."

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 4:23, 24. "And be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness."

<sup>3</sup> Romans 6:4, 6, 14. "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life... knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace."

We saw earlier in Romans 6 that the beginning point of our sanctification lies in our *self-identity* as Christians. The importance of this principle was set forth in the first command that Paul had expressed to his readers of this epistle. It reads, “Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 6:11). The believer is to identify himself with the new life that God has given him in Jesus Christ, not with sin that still plagues him, sin that had once controlled him prior to his conversion to Jesus Christ. The Christian must know *who* he is first, if he is *to become* more like he is in sanctification.<sup>4</sup> Paul had declared that it is because we are Christians, alive unto God through Jesus Christ, that we let not sin reign in your mortal bodies, that is, refuse to obey its passions (cf. 6:12). Rather, we are to present ourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life (cf. 6:13).

Paul then made this statement: “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not *under law* but *under grace*” (6:14). Being under grace rather than under law means that God is able to empower us to live rightly, rather than justly condemn us for sinning against Him. God had set us free from the dominion of sin and its consequences. In contrast to who we were before conversion we read, “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:22f).

In the opening verses of Romans 7, we have the explanation how we were delivered from the damning sentence of God’s law upon us due to our sin. Through the believer’s union with Jesus Christ when He was crucified, died, and rose from the dead, the believer died with respect to the law and is now under grace to Jesus Christ, rather than the law that brought guilt and damnation.

But if we consider that God’s law caused the damnation of people for their sin, one might draw the wrong conclusion that there was something inherently defective, even sinful about the law itself. Paul therefore sought to vindicate God’s law from being devalued or wrongly charged with being the believer’s problem. God used His law to bring sinners to know they are sinners so that they might receive the free grace of salvation in Jesus Christ. God used His law to bring people to become aware of their sinfulness, thereby drawing people to faith in Jesus Christ. Paul described how the law had convinced him of his sinfulness; he thereby demonstrated that God’s law was free from defect, that God’s law is indeed righteous. He had written in **verses 11 and 12**,

“For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”

We now come to our passage, Romans 7:13ff. We read in **verse 13** yet another example of Paul’s use of the rhetorical question. “*Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means!*” Paul had described the law as “good” in verse 12, and here he repeats the description. “That which is good” is Paul’s reference to the law of God.

Now what is meant when we say, “The law of God is holy, righteous, and good?” The law is “*holy*” in that it reflects God’s holy character. Holiness is an attribute of God which describes His “otherness” from His creatures, that is, He is distinct and unique from all that He created. For God to be holy means that He is of a completely different kind of essence than that which He created.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is implied in this “otherness” that God is infinitely pure and therefore the consequences of violating His commands are certain and severe.

God’s law is not only holy, but it is “*righteous*.” In this context a synonym for “righteous” might be “just.” The law of God is that standard which God sets forth as the norm of what life should be like for someone to live to please God and be “like” God to the degree that He has created us to be. The definition of “righteousness” in many biblical contexts is a life ordered according to the standards of God’s revealed law.

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<sup>4</sup> We addressed this important subject on Sunday, December 23, 2012, which is designated #FBC691.

<sup>5</sup> For a study of the idea of holiness in the OT world, see William Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the OT* (London: Epworth Press, 1983), pp. 21-50.

But God's law is also "*good*." The law of God is "good" in several respects. First, the law is good because it is a manifestation of God's holy character. (This is the same idea as above that God's law is "holy." God's law is good because it is holy as God is holy. God's law is righteous because it reflects God's standards of what is right. But second, the law is good in what it promises to the law keeper. When God had first given His law to Adam and Eve, He had promised them everlasting life of enjoyment of His favor and blessing. If Adam had kept God's law, he would have experienced God's undiminished goodness, His blessedness, for himself and all of his posterity. The greatest of good things that people could possibly desire and enjoy would have come to those who live according to God's law. God had specified to the children of Israel what they would enjoy if they kept His law. We read in **Deuteronomy 28:1-14** of God's promises to Israel conditioned on their obedience.

"And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. <sup>2</sup>And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.

<sup>3</sup>Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field.

<sup>4</sup>Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock.

<sup>5</sup>Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

<sup>6</sup>Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

<sup>7</sup>The LORD will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you. They shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways.

<sup>8</sup>The LORD will command the blessing on you in your barns and in all that you undertake. And he will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

<sup>9</sup>The LORD will establish you as a people holy to himself, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. <sup>10</sup>And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you. <sup>11</sup>And the LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your livestock and in the fruit of your ground, within the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to give you. <sup>12</sup>The LORD will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands. And you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. <sup>13</sup>And the LORD will make you the head and not the tail, and you shall only go up and not down, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them, <sup>14</sup>and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.

Now, it must be understood that God was not giving a second "covenant of works" when He gave Israel His law through Moses.<sup>6</sup> In other words, God gave His law not as He had given it to Adam, as a means of meriting God's favor, which would have been a covenant of works. Rather, God gave His law to Israel as a manifestation of His covenant of grace with His people. He had delivered them from bondage and brought them, into the land of promise due to His grace, due to His promise that He had given to their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But at Sinai God gave His law as the standard by which they were to order their lives in faith and obedience to their covenant God. There was a sense, however, in which the law at Sinai was a "republication" of the covenant of works, in that God's law always served as a teacher of what they would deserve (i.e. death), if they did not continue in faith to their covenant God.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This is one matter that is generally, but not always, distinguishes covenant theologians (us) from our dispensational friends. They tend to teach that God gave the law of Moses as a covenant of works rather than an administration of His covenant of grace.

<sup>7</sup> One way to show that the law at Sinai was given as an administration of His covenant of grace is that the writer to the Hebrews tells us clearly that Israel failed initially to enter the promised land, not because they had failed to merit doing so because they had broken the law, but rather, it was because they had no faith. "So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief" (Heb. 3:19).

And so, the law of God is “good” because it promises good to the law-keeper. The problem, however, is that because of Adam’s sin, as well as because of our own sin, no one can experience the “good” that God has promised to law keepers, for no one keeps the law or can keep the law. Only the Lord Jesus kept the law, but because He did so, He was able to secure all of the good promised to the law keeper to be enjoyed by those whose faith is in Him.

And so, Paul addressed the supposed but unjust accusation that some might level against God’s good law because of the death that it brings upon people. “Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means!” Paul then stated that it was sin that was the cause of his death sentence, not God’s good law. Paul declared in **verses 13b**, “*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.*” The New King James Version states it similarly, “*But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful.*”

The great evil and the cause of all misery and suffering is sin. When we look at the world in which we live, when we see the wickedness of mankind, the cruelty that a man will inflict on his fellow man, we see the cause here, in this matter of sin.

Now this is as far as we are going to progress in Romans 7 today. I had originally intended to address the contents of the entire two paragraphs before us in detail (7:13-19, 20-25). But the subject matter of verse 13b calls for our attention and focus. It follows that if God had given His law *so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly*, then we should do what we can to understand or comprehend in a measure this goal of our God. Paul seems to suggest that a prerequisite to growing in our sanctification is to have an understanding in a measure of the exceedingly sinfulness of our sin. The Puritans of the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were ones who gave great emphasis to the believer’s sanctification. The early Reformers, men such as Luther, Calvin, Ursinus, Bucer, and Zwingli, gave great attention to the subject of the believers’ justification, salvation from the *penalty* of sin. But the Puritans, such as John Owen, Thomas Watson, Thomas Goodwin, John Bunyan, and later, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, gave great attention to the subject of the believers’ sanctification, salvation from the *power* of sin. It is understandable, therefore, to read of many Puritan books that addressed the exceedingly sinfulness of sin. Consider these titles (which are just a representative few that I happen to have in my own library):

- *The Evil of Evils, or the Exceeding Sinfulness of Sin*, by Jeremiah Burroughs
- *The Mischief of Sin*, by Thomas Watson
- *The Sinfulness of Sin*, by Ralph Venning
- *The Anatomy of Secret Sins*, by Obadiah Sedgwick
- *Man’s Guiltiness before God*, by Thomas Goodwin
- *Alarm to the Unconverted*, Joseph Alleine

One could perhaps say without too much danger of misstatement, that a person’s degree of growth and attainment in holiness, in sanctification, will be proportional to his understanding of the degree of the depth, defilement, and deserved damnation of his sin. *Charles Spurgeon* (18<sup>th</sup> c.) wrote of this correlation between knowledge of sin and true advancement in spiritual godliness:

A spiritual experience which is thoroughly flavoured with a deep and bitter sense of sin is of great value to him that had it. It is terrible in the drinking, but it is most wholesome in the bowels, and in the whole of the after-life. Possibly, much of the flimsy piety of the present day arises from the ease with which men attain to peace and joy in these evangelistic days. We would not judge modern converts, but we certainly prefer that form of spiritual exercise which leads the soul by the way of Weeping-cross, and makes it see its blackness before assuring it that it is “clean every whit”. Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Saviour. He who has stood before his God, convicted and condemned,

with the rope about his neck, is the man to weep for joy when he is pardoned, to hate the evil which has been forgiven him, and to live to the honour of the Redeemer by whose blood he has been cleansed.<sup>8</sup>

Spurgeon, although raised in a godly home and attended church all his life and was reading His Bible and the Puritans from an early age, credited his five years of deep conviction of sin prior to his conversion at 17 to shaping the whole of his Christian experience and fruitful ministry of the Gospel. He wrote of the onset of his period of conviction:

My heart was fallow (i.e. hardened like an unplowed field), and covered with weeds; but, on a certain day, the great Husbandman came, and began to plough my soul. Ten black horses were his team, and it was a sharp ploughshare that He used, and the ploughers made deep furrows. The Ten Commandments were those black horses, and the justice of god, like a ploughshare, tore my spirit. I was condemned, undone, destroyed—lost, helpless, hopeless—I thought hell was before me. Then there came a cross-ploughing, for when I went to hear the gospel, it did not comfort me; it made me wish I had a part in it, but I feared that such a boon was out of the question. The choicest promises of God frowned upon me. I prayed, but found no answer of peace. It was long with me thus.<sup>9</sup>

Spurgeon wrote that a keen understanding of one's own sin as taught by the Holy Spirit, is evidence of God's electing love of that sinner:

Hardly a glimmer of the humbling truth of our natural depravity dawns on the dull apprehension of the worldly-wise, though souls taught from above know it and are appalled by it. In divers ways the discovery comes to those whom the lord ordains to save...

There is a vital connection between soul-distress and sound doctrine. Sovereign grace is dear to those who have groaned deeply because they see what grievous sinners they are. Witness Joseph Hart and John Newton, whose hymns you have often sung, or David Brainerd and Jonathan Edwards, whose biographies many of you have read. You seldom hear much of God's everlasting covenant in these modern times, for few men feel that thorough conviction of sin which comes directly from the teaching of the Holy Spirit. In the economy of redemption the effectual operation of the Spirit in enlightening the heart concerning its own sinfulness is sure evidence of the Father's personal love to His chosen people, and of the special atonement that the Son of God made for their transgressions.<sup>10</sup>

And so, let us take some time and speak specifically about the subject of sin. *Sin* is a word that is rarely used in our society. Even a non-Christian psychologist, **Karl Menninger**, noted and lamented this fact in his book, "*Whatever Became of Sin?*", published in 1973. He wrote these words,

In all of the laments and reproaches made by our seers and prophets, one misses any mention of "sin," a word which used to be a veritable watchword of prophets. It was a word once in everyone's mind, but now rarely if ever heard. Does that mean that no sin is involved in all our troubles--sin with an "I" in the middle? Is no one any longer guilty of anything? Guilty perhaps of a sin that could be repented and repaired or atoned for? Is it only that someone may be stupid or sick or criminal--or asleep? Wrong things are being done, we know; tares are being sown in the wheat field at night. But is no one responsible, no one answerable for these acts? Anxiety and depression we all acknowledge, and even vague guilt feelings; but has no one committed any sins? Where, indeed, did sin go? What became of it?<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography, Volume 1, The Early Years* (Banner of Truth, 1973), p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> Menninger, Karl, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (Hawthorne Books, 1973), p. 13.

In contrast with society, Christians recognize the reality of sin and the need to be saved from it. But even among Christians sin is often viewed as a trifle when compared with the biblical presentation of sin as immensely vile and perverse which deserves the wrath of God. Our view of sin will influence our understanding of all other things. It will influence how we view God. We will think little of God's holiness, justice, His wrath if we think little of our sin. But we will also think little of His love, mercy, and grace if we think little of our sin. The reason people do not regard Christ as a great Saviour is because they do not see themselves as great sinners in need of one. It will influence how we view ourselves. Do we see ourselves as helpless and needy of God's mercy and grace? Or are we quite self-sufficient and have it all together. Can we go days without prayer? It is because we see sin as a minor thing. Are we selfish? Do we demand our rights? Are we proud? If so we do not see our sin.

Sin will also affect how we view others. If we do not see the evil of the sin in ourselves, we will tend either to justify it in others or condemn in others what we do not see to be in ourselves. We will either be as the Corinthians who boast and became arrogant over their tolerance when we should have mourned and taken action against a sinning one (1 Cor. 5:1f), or we will go to the other extreme as the "sons of thunder" who would call down fire from heaven to consume others which called for the Lord's rebuke, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of" (Luke 9:54f). We will not be moved with compassion as we should, to rescue or to warn. Jude instructed his readers, "Have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh" (Jude 22f).

We could argue from Romans 7 that in order to experience the grace of God in our sanctification we must be keenly aware and thoroughly convinced of the "exceeding sinfulness of sin" (cf. 7:13). As a pastor I have often observed that a major reason people make a mess of their lives and their children is that they view sin as a trifle. Consequently they do not watch themselves closely nor do they set bounds for their children. They see no danger because sin does not alarm them. Perhaps sin is not attractive to them, but neither is it repulsive. Sin does not scare them. Maybe they do not indulge themselves in grossly sinful activities, but because sin is not a hated and feared thing, they are overtaken by degrees by its deceitfulness. They do not detect sin because they are not watching out for it. They do not see it as "crouching at the door" ready to pounce on them and their children (cf. Gen. 4:7). After a period of time elapses, they find themselves and their families hopelessly entangled in a web of sin from which there is no escape or recovery, apart from a great work of grace.