

# Law, not Sin, the Problem

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Paul puts a right relationship to law in the forefront of his victorious life teaching. He makes it as important to understand what it is to be dead to the law as to be dead to sin. This is startling, for sin is bad, but law is good. "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law," he says, "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit...so that you cannot do the things that you would. But if you be led of the Spirit," you will walk in victory, does he say? No, "You are not under the law." He puts the law right in there, meaning that it is as important to be out from under the law, as it is from under sin; indeed the two are basically connected. Then, though he admits that "the law is spiritual...holy, and just, and good," he vigorously throw it out from the believer's life: "You are become dead to the law by the body of Christ:" "Having abolished in His flesh the enmity, the law of commandments contained in ordinances:" "Blotting out the hand writing of ordinances out of the way, nailing it to His cross." Strong language!

Most believers have a partial understanding of Paul's meaning. That is to say, they have it clear that "by the works of the law shall no man living be justified," and that "by the law is the knowledge of sin," and that "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us." They understand that law carries a penalty with it, if it is broken, and that we all are law-breakers, but that Christ paid the penalty. Therefore, to that extent, we are finished with law; it cannot condemn or punish us any more. But most believers equally think in some vague way that we are still bound to obedience to law. Is not the New Testament full of commands to be obeyed? Certainly we have moved clean out of the false notion that we are righteous before by keeping the law, "going about to establish our own righteousness," but we have not moved clean out of maintaining some place for law in the believer's life. But Paul

throws it right out, bag and baggage. Not just the works of the law, but law itself: "Christ is the end of the law."

We have, therefore, to delve deeper to get this into right perspective. We have already said that law can be defined as the way things work, and they don't work any other way. At the creation only one law was given to man (the way man works)—the law of receptivity—"Eat." But man obeyed that simplest of all laws in reverse, by eating of the tree of self-sufficiency.

Now the situation changed. Instead of eating of the right tree and receiving Him who is live and who would live the love-life through him (which is the fulfillment of all law), he had been taken captive by the huge delusion that he could manage his own life. So now the history of law in our fallen world begins. God in mercy and grace meets man on his new blinded level and says in effect, "You can live your own life? Very well, here is the law. Man is made to love God with all his heart, mind and strength, and his neighbor as himself. Obey it."

In other words, God institutes an elementary and external form of law, suitable to man's condition—the form of "do this and you will live." Twice in the Scriptures it is called man's elementary religion: "we, when we were children, were in bondage to the elements (rudiments of the world...under the law." And "wherefore if you be dead with Christ from the rudiments (elements) of the world, why ... are you subject to ordinances, Touch not; taste not; handle not?"

Law, therefore, was the first form of God's grace, because it imposed an impossibility on man—that the selfish one should be selfless—and gave him the chance of discovering his truly lost condition.

Man's response to law has been twofold. The first response damn's, the second opens the door to salvation. The first response is hypocrisy, the second honesty. Hypocrisy means pretending to be what we are not. All men, including ourselves, have done that. We have sought to build our own righteousness and maintain our own respectability by pretending we keep God's

law, by religion, a little of it where convenient; a little religion, a little ethics, and so on. What we really do is to display the one or two commands we do keep, but carefully hide the dozens we break. We cling to an eleventh commandment—Thou shalt not be found out! This attitude finally damns us, because it is not ultimately sin that damns; God has provided for that; it is dishonesty, refusal to admit and confess sin. “This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light...and hateth the light, neither cometh to the light.”

Man’s other response to law is honesty. Recognition that we are all law-breakers. That is the one capacity we have recognition and admission of fact. That is what Jesus meant in the parable to the Sower, when He said the good seed fell into an “honest and good heart.”

Now law, as the elementary religion for humanity, has done its first work. It had compelled those who respond to admit that they are law-breakers and therefore exposed to the consequences of broken law. Its first work is to produce and pronounce guilt: “what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that...all the world man be guilty before god.” So far so good. Every sinner saved by grace knows this. But law has not yet finished its work. That is why Paul makes these references to the law in relation to the believer. There was a subtler, profounder purpose in the giving of the law, which can probably only be realized after the law has done its first work. Man’s real trouble is not the sins he commits and their consequences, but the root cause of his sinning. That root cause is the spirit of error living in him and having total dominion over him, because the fundamental fact of human nature is its helplessness. Man is created to be possessed. But the spirit of error in him has carefully hidden this fact from him, so that he things he is self-sufficient. That was the ground of God’s challenge to him through the law: “If you can, do it!”

Conviction of sin and admission of condemnation through the law is really also admission of helplessness; but few see that

at the time of conversion, because we are more concerned with consequences than causes. We still labour, therefore under the delusion that we can do much to serve God aright; and the pulpit is often the worst culprit in making us think so and exhorting us to do so. Even the Bible, misread by those who don't yet understand (and meant to be so misread, till they learn their lesson) appears to be full of exhortations to us to obey the commands of God.

This is why Paul reintroduces law in his statements about effective Christian living, and heads it up in the great law chapter, Romans 7. Most significant is that it follows Romans 6 and precedes Romans 8. It was not put here idly. Paul is following through his masterful train of thought in the whole letter. Romans 6: We, the redeemed, have been freed once for all from our old slavery to our old master in the cross of Christ. Let us now walk in newness of life. How do we so walk? Not under law, but by the Spirit, and Romans 8 outlines that triumphant life.

But wait a moment. Before we can walk confidently in Romans 8, we have a lesson to learn. We have lived under the form of elementary religion, the law; and the law kept telling us to do this or not do that. Why? Because it had a deep and subtle error to expose. We thought we could do things by our own strength, so God sent the law, in grace, to catch us out. We did not do the things we thought we could. We did not keep God's law. But more than that. We could not keep it.

Now, said Paul in Romans 7, watch the effect of being "under the law." It says to you: you do this. We say we will and want to (we delight in the law after the inward man). But we find a contrary principle at work in us, compelling us to do the things the flesh wants to do, not the Spirit—and we follow the flesh. We find we are "sold under sin," and that "sin swells in me." How is this? Because, not having yet fully understood our selves, we have not yet grasped the fact that self-reliant self is sin, that is what Satan is, and self-reliant self can only desire to please itself, that is the power of sin in it. But in Christ we are no longer self-reliant selves; instead, we are containers of Him. "We are not in

the flesh, but in the Spirit.” He, who is love, is Himself the law, and lives that life of love through us.

Then what has happened? If that is so, why do we experience the bondages and defeats of Romans 7? Because not having completely learned, or easily forgetting, the basic helplessness of self, and its only function to be the container of the Spirit, we are constantly assaulted by temptation to be something or do something or not do something. Obey those commands pray more, give more witness more, be more patient, don't lose your temper, get rid of those evil thoughts, struggle against your lusts, and so on. The real answer to all these is Christ within. He is the Person like this, and I boldly reckon on Him to live like that in me. But because I have been so used through the years to do things for myself, before I know where I am, I have slipped back into the illusion of being an independent self, and set about trying to obey that law. The moment I do that I have slipped back into Romans 7, and am in the flesh, in bondage to indwelling sin; and of course I cannot do the things that I would, and do the things that I would not. It is an illusion that I act as if I was temporarily out of Christ, and under an external law; though the effects of the illusion, the sin I commit is no illusion, but a reality that has to be confessed and cleansed.

So Paul says we believers have nothing to do with Romans 7. It is not a chapter for us, we do not live there. He categorically starts by saying that we are like a wife whose husband has died and so can legally marry another. Thus we have died to the law in the death of Christ, and been married to another, the risen, indwelling Christ. We for the adult “religion” of the indwelling Christ who of the chapter, he spends the remainder of the chapter describing the condition of those who forget they are no deepest lesson—to teach us, not only our guilt, but our helplessness; and who as a consequence slip into trying to respond to law's demands, and at once find that they are temporarily enslaved again to the spirit of self-love which has its home in independent self. Thus trying to do good becomes a believer's chief sin, in place of trying to do evil, the sin of the unbeliever.

Law is always with us, as is the flesh, the devil, the world. They are not dead, but we dead to them. Therefore, law is always round the corner to catch us out, and we need catching out until we need catching out until we learn our lesson. Every sort of enticement can be law to an earnest soul. We read a stirring biography. Why aren't we like that? Down we go under false condemnation, because we have allowed an external "You ought" to slip in instead of "Christ is whatever He pleases to be in me." These constant exhortations to be better Christians, even the commands of Scripture, become external law to us, instead of, "Lord, you are all those things in me. Please live them out through me. "For the hidden secret of the Bible is that its commands are to the new man, which is Christ in me, not just lonely know Him, if we keep His commandments..." But then verily is the love of God perfected...He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked."

In temptation it is the same. Enticement comes, followed by the warning frown of the law, "You must not." If we follow that and try not to, we are back in the bondage of helpless self, and sin in the flesh. The answer is to remember temptations "take" us. The relationship between us and sin, flesh, world and law, is that between light and darkness. Where is the darkness when light is shining? It is there, yet it isn't there. Withdraw the light, there is the dark. It is kink of swallowed up by the light, as the Scripture says mortality will be swallowed up of life. So it is with flesh and Spirit. We are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, Romans 8 says. Yet the flesh is there. Where? Swallowed up while we walk in the Spirit. And when it begins to shew its head by temptation, the answer is to reaffirm our stand in the Spirit. Turn the light on, and where is the dark? And so with the world and the devil—and the law.

The use of the word "death" in the Scripture needs understanding also. It is never used except as the reverse side of resurrection. In other words, if there is a death on one plane, there is always a resurrection on another. Death is never dissolution. People can be in bondage because they imagine, for instance, that if they are dead to sin, they should never have any

feelings or response again in that direction. But when the Scriptures say that lost humanity is "dead in trespasses and sins," that certainly means dead towards God. But does that mean that God can make no approach to us and we no response? Obviously not. So also when we are dead to the world, and to sin, and have crucified the flesh, it does not mean that we have passed into a realm where such are non-existent and cannot appeal to us. What death and resurrection means is that we are officially out of one realm and in another. If dead towards God, we are clean outside the kingdom of God, though not outside appeals from it. If dead towards sin, it is likewise. If as a member of one nation, I change my nationality, I die to my former country and "rise" to my new one; but that does not mean I cannot visit the old relationship in Christ towards law, sin, flesh, world. Thank God, that means really out of them and really in Christ, though not out of reach of their enticements and solicitations, and sometime paying them visits from which I have to return with confession and for cleansing.