

Dead to Law Part One:

What is Law?

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The studies in "Dead to Law" will draw their focus from Romans Chapter 7, a chapter well worn in many a Bible and for good reason. The subject of law stands central in the scriptures, for "sin is not imputed where there is no law" (Rom. 5: 13). If God had not commanded Adam and Eve not to eat from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil," they could have eaten from it freely without sin. Enticed, however, they gravitated toward the one thing God told them not to do. When they broke that law, they gave themselves, unknowingly, to Satan's power, and Satan entered their bodies as master of the flesh, making them slaves to their bodily cravings.

Prior to their disobedience, Adam and Eve lived by the Spirit of God—the Spirit that governs our emotions, reasoning processes, and physical appetites. Paul, speaking of the fruit of the Spirit, names "self control" (also called "temperance") as one fruit, indicating that self control is impossible apart from the Spirit that *is* self control; for just as God is love, God is each fruit of the Spirit.

Therefore, when someone exercises self control, that person operates from the grace of God, knowingly or unknowingly, just as every beat of a person's heart and every inhale and exhale of air occurs only by God's sustaining power. Sometimes we forget that we live in a sea of God's grace, expressed in His created universe: "He makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45).

So God intended Adam and Eve to live by the inner control of the Holy Spirit and not a control activated by their flesh. Likewise, God intended His command to them to find obedience through His Spirit that indwelled them and not the efforts of their wills to obey.

This brings us to the secret of God's law: any law simply expresses how something works, so God's law expresses His being and nature. Stated another way, the law is God's nature in commandment form, for no law can have any existence outside of the being of God.

What is the nature of God? Again, "God is love" (I John 4:8), meaning that any law He gives can only express love. Furthermore, God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). When I met my wife Tandy, she loved to say two things about lying: the first was, "Oh what a wicked web we weave, when at first we do deceive." The second was this: "My mother always said that a liar is a self-for-self."

Our comfort in God derives from his faithfulness; He never changes, as James says of Him, "there is no variation or shadow of turning" (James 1:17). Imagine someone who is always faithful, always loves, and never changes an iota from that. He always has our best interests at heart and never does anything otherwise.

Therefore, any law He sets forth can only be an expression of love and truth. Furthermore, only God can keep His own law, so Adam and Eve could only have obeyed God by referring His commandment to God's governing Spirit in them. Really, then, God would have been obeying His own law in them through their faith. God really planned in essence to live His divine life through them and as them. How radical: God intended Adam and Eve to live as human forms of God, not being God, but in union with Him and therefore one with him. Paul expresses this powerfully in 1 Cor. 6:17 where he says, "He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him."

Something went wrong, though, in the Garden; the serpent enticed Adam and Eve to begin believing in a self-life apart from God, a self-life that could have its own wisdom and knowledge. Instead of being in union with God and one with Him, they wanted to be independent selves. Satan led them in this direction by introducing doubts about God, as if God really acted from selfishness in denying them something. Satan, the eternally selfish one, successfully projected his own hateful, deceiving nature onto God and made himself look like a hero, clueing them in on all the good things they were missing out on.

Once Eve began to see God as holding out on her, she grasped at the serpent's lie that they could be as gods (Gen. 3:5). Perhaps she thought she could gain in Adam's eyes if she brought this new revelation to him. Sadly, she fell, and Adam, wishing to hold onto her no matter what, chose her over God. As the cliché goes, "The rest is history." As we learned in Romans 5:12, when Adam sinned, everyone born in the line of Adam sinned at the same time he sinned, for we were in him.

The terrible truth soon overtook them both; they now lived in slavery to the spirit that deceived them, a spirit that is the opposite of self-control. Yet Satan continually tries to control himself, as well as deceive people into thinking they can control themselves: powerlessness is not a concept in Satan's handbook, surrender does not occur to him. Satan's creed follows this line: "I am my own boss, and my life belongs to me."

Naturally then he imparts this creed of the self-life to everyone at birth, since he is the "ruler of this world" (John 12:31). Every baby from the cradle (except Jesus who was not born of Adam) lives in the bondage of self until the new birth into union with Christ.

But we don't know this bondage until confronted with God's law over and over again, for even when confronted with God's law, we first make promise after promise to keep that law until repeated effort and failure wear us out and condition to accept our powerlessness and vesselhood. The "I can do it" spirit, stoked from the hidden furnace of Satan in our members, insists on one delusional try after another.

God knew all along that Adam and Eve could not keep His law by self-effort, as He knows we can't. We are the ones needing to wake up to our inability to keep the law. So God gave more and more laws, intending to wear us out and convict us of sin (Rom. 5:20).

The whole nature of the old covenant under Moses stemmed from this one purpose of God—to prove that self-effort to keep the law leads to abundant sinning, not abundant life. God means for us to live an abundant life: Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). But

we only know abundant life after an honest confession of abundant death trying to live by self-power.

The law serves as a mirror of how we live life: when the law comes to you, say now, "God, thank you that you keep your law in me; I could never do it.'

Dead to Law Part Two: Justified by Faith

The previous study focused on the law as a form of God's being and nature, never intended by God to exist as a separate code for mankind to try and keep in order to be justified. Instead, God gave the law to prove that only the Spirit of God can keep it, for the law describes God. Think for a moment about what science calls the law of gravity. Does a law of gravity really exist, or does only gravity exist? If the latter, then the law of gravity describes what went on anyway before someone observed it and explained the nature of it.

Think of righteousness: if only God is righteousness, then the law of God describes what He alone is. We can only be righteous, therefore, by being filled with His righteousness. Accordingly, Paul says, "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16).

This truth repels those still wishing to please God by working to become better Christians. I'll never forget a testimony a friend of mine gave to a group of sailors years ago. He started out saying, "I used to think that God looked at my life like a pair of scales: one side represented the good things I did, and the other side represented the evil things I did. I hoped that in the end the good side would outweigh the bad side, and God would let me into heaven." Then he went on to share how the Bible convicted him that no one with anything on the bad side of the scales could get into heaven. Not only that, no one can remove anything from the bad side of the scales once it is there. The Father had to empty all the scales onto Jesus at the Cross so that He could put all of Jesus' righteousness into us at the resurrection.

Amazingly, even before God gave Moses the old covenant law, Abraham saw that righteousness comes by faith in Christ. We might not think that Abraham saw Christ, but Jesus says that he did.

"Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). Abraham knew the messianic promise, so when God promised a son would come from his own loins, "he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

Paul takes up this verse with great force in Galatians Chapter 3 to assert that righteousness by faith existed before the law of Moses and that God "preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying 'In you all the nations shall be blessed'" (Gal. 3:8).

Why then did God introduce the old covenant law? Paul explains that the law served as a "guardian" and "steward" over the heir until the fullness of time came in Christ (Gal. 4:1-7). Even today, though the new covenant supersedes the old covenant, legalism serves as a self-inflicted bondage until the struggling heir to grace throws off the lie of independent self that keeps a person under the law. And even under the old covenant, men and women of faith learned that "the just shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4).

So the law always served as a shell leading to grace. The resurrection of Christ fully confirmed that grace.

Paul's introduction to Romans Chapter 7, therefore, carries a bit of irony when he says, "Or do you not know brethren (for I speak to those who know the law)...?" Romans Chapter 6 also began with the question, "Or do you not know...?" There, he made the point that the Christian died in Christ and no longer lives, breaking the dominion of sin, for sin cannot operate in a dead person. Similarly, in Romans Chapter 7 he chides those that know the law by saying that the law only exercises dominion over one still living.

But wait a minute; Paul just explained that we are dead to sin because we died in Christ. So if we died in Christ, we died to the law as well as to sin. The connection is vital, for Paul tells us that "the strength of sin is in the law" (1 Cor. 15:56). As we saw earlier, "sin is not imputed where there is no law" (Rom. 5:13).

What sense would it make for God to declare us dead to sin in Christ's death, but leave us alive to the law as if we were independent selves that can keep it? God knew all along that we

could never keep His law; we're the ones that didn't know it. We didn't even know we needed to die to trying to keep His law.

Furthermore, after finding that out, we couldn't even die to trying to keep it; Christ had to die as us. He became Mr. Independent Self on the Cross (2 Cor. 5:21). Therefore, we died to sin and the law at the same time and in the same way—by being in Christ's body death on the Cross.

Having stated this, Paul illustrates the point using marriage. He compares the law to a husband, for wives get frustrated trying to please their husbands just as surely as believers get frustrated trying to please God. The wife tries and tries and tries, and good husband or bad husband, the result turns out the same. Even a good husband will appear a tyrant after a while because the problem lies in the wife's efforts to please, since she keeps herself under law.

Husbands, this doesn't cast a great light on us either, for haven't we, under law, made demands as if the wives could keep them? Paul doesn't flatter the husbands, making them analogous to the law in such a way that the desperate wife finally cries out, "Is there anyone else out there I can marry?"

But under the law, the wife can only marry again if her husband dies. What a great wish to have for your husband! Occasionally husbands do die, and widows remarry; but the law never dies or goes away. To remarry spiritually (free ourselves from Satan and marry Christ), we must die and in fact did, "through the body of Christ" (Rom. 7:4).

Before, the law constantly aroused the flesh to do the opposite. Hard working flesh, instead of keeping the law, finds itself stirred to a terrible lust to do the opposite of what the law requires. The hopeful, compliant soul finds itself in the awful grip of sundry passions. Torn and failing, many try to resolve the agony by invalidating the law or at least lessening its demands to bring it within reach of compliance through human effort. God resists this, saying, "My law is holy and good; keep it as I gave it" (Rom. 7:12).

No wonder God appears like an overbearing perfectionist. Overbearing, He's not; perfectionist He is: "Be ye perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Christ in you is the secret to perfection. "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). He who gives the law keeps the law in us.

Have you died to the law? If you say, "No," Paul has one question for you: "Do you not know...?" (Rom. 7:1). Enjoy your perfection today.

Dead to Law Part Three: The Real Marriage

The discovery that we died to sin in the body death of Christ only brings relief if we equally know that we died to law in that same body death. Dead to law means that the human self no longer bears the responsibility for keeping God's law; that responsibility shifts to Christ in us in our union with Him. God easily keeps His own law, since His law expresses His nature of self-giving love. And we, therefore, being united to Him, and living as branches of His vine—drawing all life from the vine through our branches—can say with the apostle John, "His commandments are not burdensome" (I John 5:3 NKJV). But before we know our union with Christ as branch to vine (John 15:1-5), His commandments seem a burden, because we find we cannot keep them, and they condemn our failures.

No one likes condemnation, and so something must be done to try and relieve the stinging guilt and shame felt when resolution after resolution to do better fails. Two options exist: we can lower the standard or raise ourselves up to the standard. That's why many go to the Scriptures and begin to interpret the laws there as too harsh or unrealistic—even repressive to happy life in this world. Others blame the Christians for trying to kill the fun we would all have if we just threw out these laws in the Bible and let ourselves relax and enjoy drugs, free sex, and a host of other pleasures. Why be so strict when life is short and many marriages land in "irreconcilable differences"? Think of the poor woman, who, under the law, cannot marry another man unless her husband dies (Rom. 7:2).

If human marriage were the point, God would have made easier laws for trying different mates until finding a suitable match. Sooner or later, each person could find that person, probably not perfect—but at least compatible—who would satisfy his or her needs. The self could be fulfilled through romance and a daily walk through life with a “significant other,” the significance being that the “other” meets MY needs. Then everyone could sing along with the latest pop or country version of “I will love you forever,” since marriage would meet every human need for emotional and physical fulfillment.

What a lovely dream, and that’s exactly what it is—a dream. This represents the human dream apart from Christ—everything and everyone for me. “I will love you forever” really means, “I will love you as long as you meet my needs.”

But what if God doesn’t see human marriage as the real marriage? Would that shock you? What if He knows we can live without husbands and wives; we can live without emotional bonding and sex within human marriage? Does that mean these are wrong or God didn’t create them for our pleasure and praise to Him? Of course not. But it does mean marriage does not provide the ultimate fulfillment in this life. If marriage does provide that for you, you might want to open yourself to the Holy Spirit to convict you of idolatry.

What does this digression on marriage, by the way, have to do with being dead to law? The answer lies close at hand, for Paul tells us that the strength of sin comes from the law (I Cor. 15:56), meaning that sin grows stronger in a person’s life the more that person sees himself or herself as a separate human self, trying to keep God’s law. No wonder people go back into the Bible and try to take out God’s laws or else make them less strict. Paul, having been a Pharisee, possessed complete expertise in either bringing God’s laws within his reach or seeing himself as somehow a keeper of those laws.

But one law evaded his ability to rationalize away his repeated failure: “Thou shalt not covet” (Rom. 7:7). This law strikes at our beings and forces us to finally admit our inability to love others continually when the cost is too great to ourselves. Only God can

do that; love is *His* nature. Paul could reason around every other law but the one against coveting—a law against being self-for-self. He discovered that coveting stems from pride and leads to envy and hatred when others rise above us or get what we think we should have. What a fiery sting covetousness has, for the fire behind it comes from the devil.

But why does Paul say that we died to law to be married to another? We died to the lie of being independent selves, the lie that Satan uses to keep non-Christians married to him even when they don't know it. Yes—when we thought we were just ourselves as non-Christians, we were married to the devil. As Christians, we can never be married to the devil, but we can commit adultery with him. The body death of Christ put us into a marriage with Christ: "He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit" (I Cor. 6:17). John the Baptist said of Christ, "He that hath the bride is the bridegroom" (John 3:29), and in Revelation 21:9 the angel said to the apostle John, "I will show thee the bride, the Lamb's wife."

Every Christian is really married to Christ; that's what being a vessel means; "vessel" connotes the feminine aspect. That's why in I John 3:9, the apostle says, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him." The Greek word for seed is "sperma," meaning that a Christian bears fruit by uniting with God as bride to husband.

Our marriage to Christ puts human marriage into perspective. Paul sets forth our faith in Christ as that which heals human marriage: apart from Christ it can only remain an endless bondage of self-seeking—husbands and wives clutching at each other to get, get, get. But when we live from our heavenly marriage, Christ transforms our desires to give, give, give. In Ephesians Chapter 5 Paul addresses husbands and wives about their attitudes to assume in Christ as they apply their faith to their marriages on earth. But his ultimate point does not concern fixing a human institution so much as expounding the mystery of our marriage to Christ, for he says, "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (Eph. 5: 32).

God created marriage for pleasure, praise, and procreation. A good marriage provides rich satisfaction in learning self-giving love

and family responsibility. But the real marriage is the marriage to Christ—the marriage that took place on Calvary when we died to law in the body of Christ so that we can live forever in heavenly union with Him. If we do not marry on earth, or our mate fails us, or death separates us from a mate, we always live from our marriage to Christ. He meets every need all the time and even earthly marriage is only as good as what we know of our marriage to Christ.

Have you discovered your marriage to Christ through his body death? If not, the best is yet to come.

Dead to Law Part Four: In the Flesh

The word “flesh” makes most Christians cringe with discomfort because of its association in traditional Christian thinking with “the old nature.” A Christian supposedly possesses an old nature and a new nature, the old nature wanting to sin and the new nature wanting to perform righteousness. These two natures endlessly war, leaving the Christian feeling torn from never-ending conflict while in this earthly body. Many use “flesh,” “old nature,” and the “human body” interchangeably, associating evil with the self.

But what if the problem is not the human self? If not, the culprit must be found elsewhere. An opportunity to address this issue arose when the Corinthian church got mired up in problems stemming from jealousy and strife that caused divisions (I Cor. 3:1-3). Paul said that these problems proved them to be still babes in Christ, nursed by milk. Now there’s a time to be a baby, but we all know that babies cry when they don’t get their needs met; they haven’t learned to focus on something greater than their own needs.

Babes also worship heroes and compare them to other heroes. When I was a kid, there were plenty of times I was mad at my dad or thought he wasn’t the greatest dad. But if another kid on the block bragged about his dad, I would still say, “My dad can beat up your dad.” I saw my dad as an extension of myself; he was my franchise.

Later it was my team, my school, my pastor, my girlfriend, etc. The world existed as an extension of myself. When my world

disappointed me or did not meet my needs, pride seethed and jealousy flamed up into an inferno. Hurt and anger soon followed where pride and jealousy did not surrender to the Cross.

Situations like this multiply when we do not see that in our union with Christ we are all joined to the same person; we all live as branches of the one vine; we all live in union with the Holy Spirit. Therefore, as the body of Christ, we are all the same person—Christ—in our individual forms. Paul says that all Christians make up “one new man.” So when one member suffers, all members suffer with it, and when one member experiences honor, all the members rejoice with it (1Cor. 12:26).

But the Corinthians didn’t know this yet and so compared themselves with each other and competed with each other. In response, Paul said, that they walked “as men.” What a curious phrase—they walked as men, implying that they walked as mere men: they walked as if they were *only* men. In other words they walked in the flesh.

Here we are back to that term “in the flesh” and needing to define what that means. In Romans 8:9 Paul says, “Ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.” Paul does not talk here about being anointed with the Spirit, or filled with the Spirit, or even being baptized by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). His term before us is “in the Spirit,” and this means one thing: the Spirit of God dwelling in us.

The Spirit of God dwells in us for one purpose—to author and perform everything we say and do. No longer, then, do we see ourselves as mere men; that would mean walking in the flesh. Of course, as we have commented on numerous occasions in these studies, this would mean Satan’s lie of independent self, a self not walking in God’s Spirit, but thinking the self can perform on its own. And, as observed in previous studies, flesh apart from the Holy Spirit becomes the instrument of Satan and sin.

By now we see that a Christian is not “in the flesh,” though a Christian can walk in the flesh. But what sense does that make? Everyone finally walks according to his or her center. The Christian

returns to walking in the Spirit because he or she is “in the Spirit” if indwelt by the Spirit; the non-Christian, finding obedience to God tedious and not in harmony with selfish desire, after a bout of doing some good, returns to his or her true love—SELF. No one can keep living with a schismatic self or a warring self. God created us to be simple beings that live spontaneously according to the one we choose to live in our vessels—either Christ or Satan. It just so happens that Satan’s appeal stems from a lie and a false promise—the promise that we can be just ourselves, have our own way, and be our own bosses.

Having said all of this, look at Paul’s claims in Romans 7:5,6. There was a time when we were “in the flesh,” meaning we were not Christians; we did not contain the Holy Spirit. We thought we were just our human selves; we thought flesh was all there was. Many live like this, and have throughout history; they do not believe in a world that cannot be proved by the five senses; they do not want a world that does not exist just to satisfy the five senses. They do not believe in God, because they do not want to believe in God. Spirit and body mean the same to them, and this life is all that matters to them.

Paul says that such a self-life equals being under law, and that this delusion opens the flesh up to all the motions of sin, for sin is separation from God, and law and independent self thinking constitute separation from God. Sin burns red hot when someone is “in the flesh.” And though not “in the flesh,” a Christian that walks according to the flesh—as a mere man—will experience the same driving motions of sin in his or her members.

Christ’s body death delivered us from law, however. Notice that in Romans 7: 6, Paul says that the law held us; the law enslaved and imprisoned us to those motions of sin in our members. Therefore, it does no good to strive not to be under law; no one can force his way out from under the law. It took Christ’s death as the body of the human race to sever those that believe from Satan’s tyranny of law in us.

“In the Spirit” we see ourselves two made one in our marriage to Christ, and we no longer walk as mere men, but as Christ in our

forms. As Paul says, we serve “in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter” (Rom. 7:6).

Therefore, the “old nature” that Christians hang their heads over, and the “flesh” that triggers condemnation does not mean a bad human self, but a human self stolen by Satan through a lie and misused by him. Then he wants to evade detection by smearing the human self with a sense of shame as if the human self caused the problem, when all along, God’s marvelous created selves were no more than stolen and misused by sin. Have you located the lie many Christians believe about the “old nature”? If so, you’ve solved a big riddle!

Dead to Law Part Five: No Escape but Death

In Romans 7:6, Paul says, “We should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter,” since in Christ we died to the law. Anticipating some criticism toward the law, Paul asks the essential question about the law: “Is the law sin?” (Rom. 7:7). After all, if sin only operates through law, then perhaps law stands to blame for wrongfully provoking people to sin. What support might one muster to make a case against the law?

First, John says, “The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). That could sound like Christ superseded the law, since the New Covenant supersedes the Old. Hebrews 10:1 says, “For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect.” Stated another way, the animal sacrifices in the Old Testament could never eradicate sin, so the laws pertaining to them could at best point toward the blood sacrifice of Christ. But imperfect as those laws were, they stood firm, requiring obedience, until superseded by Christ.

Second, God ordained many social and governmental laws for the nation of Israel under the Old Covenant—laws that no longer pertain under the New Covenant since God’s organism on the earth during the present age is the church and not the nation of Israel. God has a future plan for Israel in the day when, as a nation, it

recognizes Christ as messiah, but in the present age, Jews that become Christians join the body of Christ—the church. The New Testament writers give various commands in the practical portions of their writings, but nothing that approximates law as systematized under Moses. New Testament commands distill down to the law of love and simple affirmations on obeying authority figures as long as they do not ask those under their headship to sin.

Third, some laws under the Old Covenant reflect timeless moral law: idolatry, stealing, murder, and coveting, for example, remain timeless laws because they express God's self-for-others nature, and love could never break these laws. Though the laws of temple worship passed away and though Jewish civil law passed away, "Thou shalt not covet" could not pass away unless God Himself passed away.

So the law stands eternal in its rigorous demands for all that seek to be right with God by keeping it. And although the law stirs the motions of sin in those that try to obey in their own strength, the law stands as blameless for that sin—this despite Paul's assertion that sin took opportunity through the law to bring about more and more lust of every kind.

How does sin use the law to stir up all that lust? Satan takes God's law and entices us when he says, "You can keep this." Though God commands us to keep the law, He never expects us to; He intends only that the law convict us of sin and produce a living hell in us—making us feel like death itself and questioning, "How could I have been so alive only to now be in such torment?"

Paul actually says, "I was alive without the law once"—a rather strange statement. In fact he was dead and didn't know it; self-will filled his being, and he lived in the illusion of being alive and doing well. But when the law came, his self-will thrashed in futility, trying to attain life through the law's commands. The harder he tried, the more apparent his failures appeared. Watchman Nee once compared the law to a stirring-stick in water, with sediment resting on the bottom, until the stick sets it in motion.

An intense struggle ensues when law asserts itself; either the law must die or we must die. As we saw previously, Paul compares

the law to the husband that must die for the wife to marry another man. But as we also just saw, some of God's law stands eternal—never to change or pass away. Therefore, Christ had to become law-breaking humanity on the Cross so that in his death, we as lawbreakers could die. But a dead body, though no longer breaking the law, cannot keep it either. The Holy Spirit, therefore, entered Christ in the resurrection as a picture of Christ keeping His law now in us as we live by faith in His keeping.

So now I say, "God, I will commit any sin if you don't keep me; but thank you that you are keeping me." I end up in faith that He is keeping me; I live in the is-ness of that keeping. That's why the Christian life is simple even though full of temptation and trials; "for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

When God asks something of me, I know His word is "holy, just, and good" (Rom. 7:12). The challenge lies not in dulling or negating His word, but in trusting the resources of Christ indwelling to perform what He commands. St. Augustine once said, "command what Thou wilt; give what Thou commandest." Once when a lady of the night he had known followed him crying out, "Augustine, Augustine, it is I," he finally turned with compassion and said, "I know, but it is not I." Augustine knew that Christ lived in him.

Romans chapter 7 challenges the honest, seeking heart; it offers nothing to those choosing to invalidate the law, for then the worshipper never discovers the frightening depths of the satanic self-life that hides under the pretense of keeping the law. God does not mean for anything to lessen the death struggle that takes place when we stand before the immutable measuring stick of His law. He means sin to stand exposed in all its ugly pride, so the beauty of Christ can grow in us as a pure lily that neither toils nor spins.

Life consists of pairs of opposites, and one must swallow up the other: light must swallow up darkness; life must swallow up death. The law exposes darkness and death to the full measure, so that Christ can abide in us in full measure. Paul does not offer his biography as unique, for all have sinned; but he does offer it as an example of honest pursuit for the full truth. Only when we see the negative truth of sin in us will we see the need to say, "I am crucified with Christ" (Gal.2: 20).

Occasionally someone asks if Paul describes his non-Christian life or a crisis with the law after he was a Christian. Frankly, I don't know. Ideally the non-Christian would fully struggle with the law and at conversion discover himself dead to the law. But most often Christians know the forgiveness of sins at conversion and set out to keep God's law—only later to experience the rude shock of failure in trying to please God.

"But how wonderful to finally say, "I no longer live." Will you say that?"

Dead to Law Part Six: Where's the Exit?

The life (really a lie) of self-improvement leads to a dreary life; at first our efforts to keep the law stem from conviction that we possess the ability and the obligation to do so. But as time goes by and success evades us, we trek across an ever-frustrating wasteland of failure. Resolution leads to resolution; surely another fresh start will work, but "my-oh-my" how the self grows wearier with each try. Maybe this isn't such a good plan after all, but no escape exists, for we find ourselves "held" by the law (Rom. 7:6).

Those were great days when we lived vibrantly alive before the law entered; we came and went as we pleased, with little thought except about our next plan to enjoy life. Paul also knew days like that—days when life moved along almost effortlessly with anticipation of more good to come. Then one day, in the name of God, someone shows Paul a copy of God's law, and he realizes that he repeatedly does those things forbidden by that law. Denial springs up as he struggles to hold on to his former life, but confronted with God's law, he has to concede that he has been wrong and needs a change.

But wait a minute; with some adjustments and re-evaluation, most things in life can remain the same; the law allows for many exceptions, and where no exceptions exist, compensatory good behavior in other areas can make up for apparent failures. So thinks Paul in his first wriggings, and so think we all in ours; certainly some adjustment of the law or our interpretation of it will

give us room to move more easily and escape this increasing dread sense of conviction that we are wrong.

Also at first, the temptation arises to call the law sin; after all, effort to keep the law continually produces the opposite of what we desire. The more we try to keep the law, the more we do the very things the law speaks against, proving us continually to be sinners. Perhaps the *law* is sin, since it serves as the occasion for our constant sinning. Therefore, if the *law* is wrong, we can appeal against it as the culprit instead of ourselves.

But in a moment of honesty, Paul acknowledges that the law is not sin (Rom. 7:7), but holy and good (Rom. 7:12). The culprit is not the law, but sin. Sin somehow uses the law to cause sin. At first this sounds vague and mysterious; what is this sin that uses God's holy law to cause sin in someone wanting to keep the law? Paul at first doesn't know the answer to this question; he only knows that he would not know the power of sin apart from the law that corners him. Furthermore, the power of sin rages so great that that he says, "For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me" (Rom. 7:11).

What death does Paul speak of here; how is he slain? The clue comes in Romans 7:7 where he narrows things down to a fundamental law of the universe that never changes: "Thou shalt not covet." This cuts to the meaning of selfhood and explains the being of God. "God is love" (I John 4:16), and He can do nothing but love. No covetousness dwells in Him, for covetousness is the opposite of His nature. But Paul says, "I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet" (Rom. 7:11).

This explains why Paul says that the law slew him; Paul found himself a coveting self. No longer can he affirm himself as a good man going wrong in disobeying some of God's laws; he sees himself as utterly self-seeking and dies to all hope of holding himself up as good. Optimism flees, hope for self-improvement dies, and hope for escape by any human means disappears.

Furthermore, Paul says that sin deceives him by making him think he can keep the law. He cannot yet accurately define sin, but he knows that sin, whatever it is, has deceived him into thinking he

can improve himself. This represents a radical reversal of thought. Before seeing the deception, Paul thinks that God intends him to keep the law through self-effort. Now he sees the impossibility of that and lies dead before the law, convinced of his utter captivity to sin. He is “held” (Rom. 7:6), “slain” (Rom. 7:11), and “exceedingly sinful” (Rom. 7:13). In desperate honesty, he admits, “For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin” (Rom. 7:14).

A critical question comes to focus when Paul experiences complete disillusionment with his ability to express anything but covetousness; how does he account for the fact that he does not wish to covet? He either must plunge into a view of himself that he not only covets all the time, but really also at his core wishes to; or he must hold onto the belief that his essential self does not will to covet, even though he covets. Holding out that he does *not* will to sin enables Paul to discover his vessel-hood.

Paul discovers himself as a vessel when he recognizes that if he does the very thing he hates, “it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me” (Rom. 7:17,20). He does not yet solve the mystery, but he does, through a process of elimination, conclude that the problem is neither the law, nor his “I.” Rather sin (consider the role of Satan here as Mr. Sin, though Paul does not clarify this here) deceives him into thinking he can escape coveting, when in fact, on his own, he cannot.

The good news so far comes from Paul’s acknowledgment that he cannot keep himself from coveting—and that the one coveting through Paul is not Paul either. The lie stands exposed; Paul does not independently do either good or evil, and neither do we! A vessel can only express the nature of an indwelling master. Sin’s deception says the opposite; sin says that the human self performs its own good or evil and that a person can choose to do either.

Paul’s brutal honesty saves him from continuing engulfed in deception. If he discards God’s law and justifies himself, he remains self-righteously deceived. If he upholds God’s law, but decides that he does not want to keep it, he sinks into despair. Only by maintaining the law’s veracity, his own impotence, and yet his own continuing desire not to covet, does he stay on the cutting

edge of hope that a solution exists; he hangs on the verge of crying out, "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:25).

Paul is about to turn his powerlessness into an asset. If you have followed Paul's brutal, but honest trail, perhaps you hang on the verge of the same cry that can turn your powerlessness into hope. Follow where this leads!

Dead to Law Part Seven: Letting Go

In Romans 7:15, Paul honestly says, "For that which I do, I allow not; for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that I do." He's not talking here about negative thoughts and feelings; everyone experiences those throughout the day, and the writer of Hebrews makes those a matter of soul—what we discern as different from spirit intent (4:12). Paul here talks about what actually rules in his members, the law of sin. He can't yet figure out how to find deliverance from his bondage to covetousness.

But Paul also works a process of elimination to discover the culprit; the law is not the problem, and his human "I" is not the problem. How do we know this? His revelation of the culprit comes when he says, "Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me" (Rom. 7:17,20). At first this sounds like another version of "The devil made me do it." He has previously said that the law held him (Rom. 7:6) and sin deceived him (Rom. 7: 11). But now the mask of sin's deception falls away and a radical choice presents itself. In our ignorance, God winks at a lot (Acts 17:30), but when He opens the truth to us, we move to faith or willingly remain in unbelief (John 9:41).

Paul works carefully through his dilemma twice: he establishes once and then again that since he continues to do what he hates and does not do what he desires, that the problem no longer rests with his "I" but with indwelling sin (Rom. 7:17,20). Many Christians arrive at this point only to miss Paul's meaning, concluding from Romans Chapter Seven that Paul means that the Christian possesses two natures—an old nature (the flesh), that continues to sin, and a new nature that walks in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This misses Paul's meaning entirely; he says the problem is not his "I," and he equally does not indict his flesh as sinful, though he says that no good thing dwells in his flesh (Rom. 7:18). Notice that he mentions "I," "me," and "my flesh" in Romans 7:17-18. If we take the flesh as an evil, old nature, we do two things: first, we make flesh the problem rather than sin; second, we miss the point that the human will cannot control the flesh and keep it from sin. Paul does not make the flesh evil; he merely asserts that the flesh has no more good of its own than does his "I." His passion here concerns showing the breakdown between his "I" (what he calls his mind in Rom. 7:25) and his flesh; his most determined mental resolutions do not keep sin from grabbing his fleshly members. His "I"—his mind—his inward man; these cannot control his "me"—his "flesh"—his "members." Nothing about Paul (or us) can keep sin out.

Therefore, the point does not consist in two natures, but in Paul's powerlessness to bring about what he wants. He even cements the facts of his experience into a law, meaning that no exceptions exist; never will he find that his will overrides sin and brings about love instead of covetousness. Paul fights to assert, not that we have two natures, but that we have no nature! Two natures do master people: Satan's self-for-self, sin nature or God's self-for-others, love nature. But neither nature originates in the human vessel; the vessel only expresses one of the two supernatural natures.

We live in an age that disputes demonic control in people: in our day doctors often treat "mental illness" instead of Satan, sin, and demons. The numerous Gospel accounts of demonic control in people's lives seem out of step intellectually with the findings of modern treatment paradigms. Certainly, mental illness does sometimes stem from chemical imbalances, but modern skeptics will someday have to acknowledge the overlooked deception of Satan that hides from people the demonic origin behind sin. Satan's chief tool for eventual mental illness is his lie that we originate our own good or evil; Satan hides the fact that we are vessels to contain a nature. No wonder so many people finally have a breakdown; trying to live as anything other than a vessel goes against the grain—against the way God created us to function. He created us to

receive life, not generate it. Widespread acceptance of vessel-hood would go a long way in restoring sanity to a restless, frustrated world.

Paul discovers his vessel-hood in Romans Chapter Seven; he discovers he has been a vessel of sin. But now he cries out in complete agony, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24). Now he turns to a "who" other than himself; he turns his powerlessness into acceptance that his rescue must come from another. Instantly he sees the Cross and says, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 7:25). Jesus Christ breaks the law of sin whereby our members can only serve sin apart from Christ in us. Just as the law of gravity causes a rock to fall unless a greater power holds it up, the law of sin holds our members captive unless Christ frees them. And free them He has!

I have a way of saying what Paul says here: I say, "Lord, I will be covetous in five minutes if you do not keep me from it; but thank you that you are keeping me." First, this confession acknowledges the law of sin that must operate unless a higher law contravenes. Second, this confession moves to faith and sees God keeping in the moment. The flesh of itself can only serve the law of sin, despite the mind's allegiance to the law of God (Rom. 7:25). Flesh cannot resist the invading power of Satan's sin spirit, and the human will also cannot prevent sin's power in the flesh. But the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit, because of the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross, does safeguard us.

Satan still does plenty of tempting every day. He sees our helpless flesh and constantly wishes to snatch it for his covetous use, making us think we are bad selves. He tempts us to covet, and then turns right around and condemns us for doing it, all the while hiding himself as the villain. During our time of ignorance, we think the problem stems from us, but finally, after honest questioning, we see, as Paul did, "it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me" (Rom. 7:17). Now our responsibility lies in simple acceptance of our vessel-hood and our cry for Christ's inner deliverance. But this is not a cry that doesn't believe; this cry believes as it cries out. The crying out believes the immediate grace of God that answers in Christ.

Satan always does his job in this world: my old friend Norman Grubb often said, "This is Satan's camp; he has a right to shoot at us" (Norman's expression for 1 John 5:19). But God always does His job even better; have you reached the end of yourself?