

# The law of Moses - benefits and limitations

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[ 0 : 00 ] Please turn to Romans chapter 7, and while you're finding that, let me recap a little bit about what we've been looking at. The question posed in the previous chapter, chapter 6, is something like this.

Shall we carry on sinning just like before we became Christians? After all, forgiveness is total and forgiveness is free.

It's an interesting question. If forgiveness is free through Jesus Christ, isn't it logical that we could just carry on sinning with lives that were no different from before?

Paul says, absolutely not. Absolutely not. Well, let's put the question into other words. How shall I live a life of holiness which is fruitful for the Lord?

Perhaps that's putting it more positively. Now that I'm a Christian, how do I, what do I think? How do I see myself? What is the way motivation operates for me to live a life of holiness which is fruitful for the Lord?

[ 1 : 22 ] Now, his exact wording is this, chapter 6, verse 1. Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?

So please notice the use of the word grace. Grace means God treating people the opposite of what they deserve.

God treating people well and favourably and blessing them even though that is not what they deserve. Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?

And in chapter 6, verse 15, almost exactly the same. Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?

That's chapter 6, verse 15. And notice that that time he's giving an alternative. He's saying, under grace, that's where we are, we are not under law.

[ 2 : 22 ] As if hearing somebody saying to him, well I could easily answer that question, Paul, if you lot were under law. And Paul says, no we're not under law, we're under grace.

So let's recap a little bit what he's meaning by all this stuff. He has previously said that the natural state of humankind is determined by our first forefather, Adam.

And because of his person and because of his work, in other words because Adam sinned, the whole of his human family have been plunged inescapably into the place of sin and condemnation and death.

Those three things going together. Sin, which is sort of behaviour. Condemnation, which is the state we are in before God's judgment.

And death, well death being death, spiritual death, physical death, death. And Paul sees that sphere, that place, sin, condemnation, death, as being, as it were, a place, and as it were, a status, and also as a power that has power over people.

[ 3 : 48 ] He contrasts it with what it is to belong to Jesus Christ. And this is all in chapter 5, verse 12 and onwards.

And he says that Christ has come to change this. And if we are linked up with Christ, we are in a different sphere, a different realm.

Not sin, but righteousness. Not condemnation, but justification. Not death, but life. And he says here is a new family to belong to, and a new kingdom, and a new place to be.

A place of righteousness, of justification. That's the opposite of being condemned. So that the judge doesn't say you're guilty, you deserve everything that guilt brings.

But justification, saying you're not guilty, and you will get everything that being not guilty brings. And Paul sees this as being a place, and being a status, and being a power as well.

[ 4 : 54 ] He talks about grace reigning, and reigning in life. So what about law? What about the way of Moses?

What about the way of the law? For Jewish people? For Jewish people? For Jewish people? That is a prime question. The Jewish people have the law.

The law of Moses. It is their birthright. It is what makes them Jewish. And what about all that? How does that compare with the way of Jesus Christ?

Or for the people that Paul was writing to, some of them had been Jews, some of them had been Gentiles who were converts to Judaism, and they were now Christians, and they might be asking, well, Paul, you're asking us to ditch half the Bible, aren't you?

What about law? What about the Old Testament? What about being Jewish? What about all that? And of course, that encompasses a whole load of things.

[ 6 : 02 ] It encompasses the Ten Commandments, the sort of summary section, the ten words. Honor your father and mother. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make an idol that looks like anything, and worship that, and say that that's the Lord.

Honor your father and mother. Do not kill. Do not commit adultery. All those things. There's the Ten Commandments, and there's a whole package of rules that goes along with that. If you've ever tried reading the book of Leviticus, you'll know that there's rule after rule after rule.

Somewhere in there, it says, love your neighbor as yourself. But it says lots of other things about the food you eat, about diseases, about all sorts of things.

And if we include in that package the particular matter of male circumcision, which marks off a Jewish male child as belonging to the race of the Jews.

[ 7 : 12 ] And if we mark off also special foods, which also marked off the Jews from all the rest, the Gentiles.

So the question is, what about that? Loads of that in the Bible. What are we to make of it? So the law of Moses, it's in the Bible, says all sorts of things.

And we might as well include in that, that whether or not we are of the Jewish faith or the Jewish race, we do carry around with us our own set of laws.

They might not be in the Bible, but they often have strong power over us. So if you are a citizen of a Western thinking, punctuality is something that is important and you feel condemned if you're late. Hygiene is very important in many cultures in certain ways. It's interesting that cultures are not always consistent about cleanliness. I was going to put be young.

[ 8 : 28 ] Be young seems to be a commandment, doesn't it? It's not easy to keep that one unless you're young. I put be thin, and that seems to be a commandment as well. And next weekend, don't forget the Father's Day card because you'll be condemned if you don't remember that.

So we all know, whatever our ethnic background, we all know what it is to have laws and commandments hanging over us. What about that? If I can recap from the beginning of Romans chapter 7, Paul gave this quite remarkable example where he said that he talked about a husband and wife, the wife being bound to the husband by a sort of law.

And this binding together lasts as long as they both live. And he starts off his example, chapter 7, verse 1.

Don't you know, brothers, I'm speaking to men who know the law. The law has authority over a man only as long as he lives. For example, by law, a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive.

If her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. And then she can marry another man. And Paul takes that example. The law and the reader, his readers, are bound together.

[ 9 : 52 ] He says, verse 4, So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ. Except he changes the way it works out in reality compared to the example he gave.

In the example he gave, the man died. The woman was free to marry another. In the way he takes it on, the woman dies. It's you, the reader.

And presumably she comes to life because she goes off with another. And she marries another. And Paul says, this is an example of your relationship to Jesus Christ.

We're not married, he says then, to the law. But because of the death of Jesus Christ, we are married to Christ. And in this way, we serve with a new dynamic, the way of the Spirit.

And that's in chapter 7, verse 6. But now, dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, not in the old way of the written code. [11:03] And that's where we got to last time. And we are told to learn what it is, to live our lives, not listening first to the rules and regulations that tell us, this is how you live, this is what you ought to be.

But first and foremost, listening to what Christ says, not seeking our approval from whether the various laws have said, well done, you did that, and not being completely scuppered if we find that we can't keep those laws, but depending on Jesus Christ.

What does he say? What words of comfort do we get from the one who is, as it were, our husband? So, married to Jesus Christ.

And that, says Paul, is revolutionary. And makes all the difference. So, that's where we got to last time. But we've still got some difficult questions to answer in the rest of the chapter.

And this morning, we'll look at verses 7 through to around verse 13. And we've asked God's help. And this is the question, the sort of thing that Paul is asking.

[12:21] So, what about the law? He's now meaning, not Father's Day cards, but the law as it is in the Bible. The law that God wrote. He asks the question, in verse 7, is the law sin?

Then, in verse 13, he says, okay, the law is good. Did this become death?

To me. And he says, no, it's not sin. And no, the law didn't become death. Although, what he ends up saying is something quite similar to that.

So, let's see what he does say. In verse 7, then, he says, the law isn't sin. But I would not have known what sin was, except through the law.

I would not have known sin, except through the law. And then he gives an example. For I would not have known what coveting really was, if the law had not said, do not covet.

[13:41] Covet is an old-fashioned word, but it means to want something that you don't have. Coveting is a peculiar sort of thing that goes on inside people.

So, you can be really content and happy in your life. And then you see that somebody else has got something that you don't have. So, you're quite happy driving your Morris Minor.

It got you there and back. Took time. But then you see somebody with a Ferrari. And your peace disappears.

And you become angry. Why can't I have a Ferrari like my neighbour down the road? And this is coveting. And that is one of the Ten Commandments.

You shall not covet. You shall not covet your neighbour's, what does it say? His ox, his donkey, his house, his wife, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

[14:42] So, that's what Paul is referring to. And he says, this has a particular way of showing what sin is.

So, he says, without the law, there's me, there's I, and there's all that money and cars and donkeys and wives and everything that my neighbour's got.

And I suppose he's saying, I wouldn't know quite what to think about it all. But when the law comes, when you introduce into that situation a clear commandment, do not covet, do not covet, do not covet, do not covet.

When that comes in, you find, oh, now I know that word, now I hear that commandment, I realise what I'm not doing.

sin. And it somehow stirs the whole matter up. And sin, what does it say?

[15:58] Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetous desire. So, this is what he's saying.

again. So, I've drawn the picture again. The law is good, but when you add the law, such as do not covet, you introduce that into the life of sinners, then it stirs up all sorts of covetous desire.

The law is good, it, he says it's an opportunity. The word is a base of operations. The idea is you think of some sort of war conflict and here's a place that the soldiers can be safe for the time being and then they're safe there and they can use that as a base and rush out from there.

It's a place that they can rush out from and attack the enemy. And it says that sin using the commandment as that sort of place from which operations can be mounted produced in me a whole load of covetous desires.

And I invite you to think whether you can identify with this or not. Because this is what he's saying. I heard this commandment and it made me think ooh I do want that.

[ 17 : 42 ] I am now unhappy because my neighbour's got something which I don't have. Or you could use covet it actually means a desire.

If you think of it it can be used in a positive way. Jesus says I've greatly desired to eat this meal with you. He uses the same word. but it covers lust. So here's somebody and they find within themselves a lust for whatever it is.

Could be money, could be things, could be for the opposite sex, could be for the same sex. but there's something that gets stirred up and once it's stirred up it's very difficult to un-stir it. So what have I put there? Coveting as wanting, coveting as lust, coveting as desiring, as having a strong desire for things that God in his providence hasn't given you.

and this isn't legitimate aspiration. This isn't just part of the human condition. The commandment tells us this is sin and here it is being stirred up and I don't know whether you've ever been in that situation where you've thought I'm going to stick to a moral code, I'm going to watch myself, I'm going to control my mind and my thoughts according to these rules and the more you think about it the less you manage to do it and the more sensitive you get to it the more sensitive you are in your conscience the more you realise you're failing and instead of producing sort of moral tranquility this mixture of sin and commandment produces all sorts of guilty frustration sense of failure etc.

[ 20 : 00 ] Let's see how Paul says it as he says it yet again in verse 8 for apart from law sin is dead and now he talks about I who exactly he means by I we perhaps need to talk about next time but let's just take it he's talking about himself he's got a Jewish background he knows the law very very well and he says let me just backtrack one sentence it's not impossible for Paul to use I in a hypothetical way so he says if I speak in the tongue of men or angels but have not love I am nothing do you know that bit from 1 Corinthians so the I there is not I as I actually am but I as I could imagine myself in this situation it does say if and it doesn't say if here but at least it shows us that Paul is capable of thinking of hypothetical situations well here he says what it was like for me before the law came once I was alive apart from law but when the commandment came sin sprang to life and I died seems to me the picture he's inviting us to consider is there he is he's quite happy he's alive sin is dormant so I put sin on my picture with little zeds which is a convention to mean asleep so sin is nice and tranquil there's no law and he carries on quite happily but you introduce law into this situation and sin bubbles up sin springs to life or comes back to life and he says the effect of this is to kill him is to bring him into the realm of death once I was alive apart from law but when the commandment came sin sprang to life and I died

I thought I tried to think of some examples one of the things that law can do is to make people proud and self righteous so we have the example in the new testament of Jesus speaking to a rich young ruler man comes to Jesus says what should I do to inherit eternal life and Jesus says well you know the commandments on your father and mother do not kill do not steal do not commit adultery and the young man says well I've done all those and that seems to me an example of a knowledge of the law producing a certain degree of pride and a certain degree of self righteousness do you think that's a fair summary of that condition the man says well I'm going what else do I need to do what do

I do to inherit eternal life and Jesus says well those are the commandments and he says well I've done them let me just spend a moment in case you were thinking that way maybe you're sitting here this morning thinking I don't really need very much of what this chap's saying because I've done all the law I'm a good person I've done all sorts of good things I've got nothing to be ashamed about when I meet God then I'll just say I've done all you asked me to do let me into heaven and in that case you wouldn't need Jesus Christ you wouldn't need grace everything would be fine let me just point out how Jesus answers that young man he says well he loved him but he says well let me point out to you that you do lack what you need to do is you need to give away all your money and follow me

I suppose that tackles covetousness actually doesn't it because what he said the man what did the young man do he went away very sad he went away very sad because Jesus had put his finger on his pride and self righteousness and I suppose as I think of it it's really to do with his covetousness the law can have this unfortunate effect of making people proud and self righteous and therefore hard because they don't think they need Jesus and let me say to you if this is the way you are thinking about whatever law it is that you're under it's killed you it hasn't given you spiritual life it's killed you here's another example about the law and its effects this is the story of St

Augustine who was actually he was a preacher in a CDC side town which always has resonances he became a Christian after trying many philosophies and part of his becoming a Christian was his realisation that he was a sinner and the thing that he mentioned pinpointed about his sin was when he was a lad he went and stole some apples being a philosopher he couldn't just let that go he had to think about it and he thought about it and he thought why did I steal those apples was it because I was hungry and he said no I wasn't particularly hungry was it because

[ 27 : 07 ] I like apples no I don't particularly like apples why did I do it I did it because it was forbidden he said I did it because it was forbidden there was just something in me that wanted to rebel and that wanted to take I don't know what you call it mindless theft and as he looked back he saw this in himself and he thought yeah it shows my sin doesn't it the fact that was forbidden stirred up my sin I suppose it's a little bit like the case of the do not throw stones onto this glass roof then I had another thought about the law and sin and its effects the law can produce pride and self righteousness but it can also produce guilt this is not when we say

I've kept the law but when we become conscious that we haven't kept the law and guilt is an extremely powerful emotion and an extremely powerful working of the human mind because when we feel that we are guilty we feel the necessity of punishment so much so that we put ourselves into a state of punishment and that can show as well I put discouragement you feel oh what's the point you feel a failure morally and it's certainly a depressing thought I'm far from saying that all instances of depression are caused by this but certainly this is a depressing thought the law shows me my guilt and I feel condemned and I feel burdened and I feel I can't escape it and so it goes on and here is the law working in conjunction with my sin to produce death let's take this a little bit further with and think of the way that Paul puts this he says

I found verse 10 I found the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death for sin seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment deceived me and through the commandment put me to death so then the law is holy and the commandment is holy righteous and good one of the things he's referencing is the garden of Eden he uses this word deceived it's a very garden of Eden word you remember the garden of Eden there's Adam and Eve all nice and happy you could imagine them in that state but we need to add into that that there is a commandment that comes which says there is a particular fruit you should not eat eat all the other fruit but not this one and then for some reason our first forefathers said oh well now now

I've been told not to I'll do it and you remember that Eve was deceived and she gave to her husband and he disobeyed and so you have this whole thing of I've tried to draw a half eaten apple core there and I've also tried to draw a snake because that's what's going on the snake is at work to beguile or to deceive and the result is well the day you eat of it you will surely die I think Paul is referencing this by his use of deceit that word sin deceives us sin deceives us it promises us things which it can't deliver and then leaves us in a state of gloom and guilt and despondency it promises life as Eve was promised life and wisdom and pleasure but what sin actually delivers is death and let's think of another reference that Paul's making

I don't think he can be only thinking of the garden because well for this I think he's also thinking of the history of Israel which works like this the history of Israel starts with Abraham and a promise given to Abraham and I'm going to draw the promise as a red line and at some point in history the law is added the law is added at the time of Moses now does the addition of the law to the promise does that solve things does that mean that the nation of Israel now becomes much better and the answer is if you know your bible history absolutely not the knowledge of the law did not produce a holy nation told them that's what they were supposed to be but it never made them into that and so I've drawn a green line indicating sin little graph sometimes it was more sometimes it was less but the graph doesn't go down to zero the law doesn't remove sin in fact if anything the graph gets more and more wild and greater and I can tell you that at the end of that graph comes the biggest sin of all when the people who should have known best who Jesus was actually said we have a law and by that law he must die and that seems to me to be the biggest irony the people who should most have known what was good actually did the worst thing they didn't do it on their own the Gentiles helped but they were the ones whose deficiency was that they should have known better sin increases up to the point of the killing of Christ so we have the line of promise which at the death of Christ zooms out in all directions with all sorts of wonderful promises and the law which comes in and increases sin and now onwards from the death of Christ our relationship with the law is changed the law well what did it do for Israel the addition of the law hardened and it made people

self righteous the addition of the law can blind people now the problem for the law the law is holy and the commandment is good but this is what it does to people who are sinners so there's a couple of things that I think

[ 34 : 40 ] Paul is referencing so let's see if we can summarise what we see in this passage it's not an easy passage and it's not a particularly happy passage let's see what we can summarise number one no one will be right with God by law no one will be right with God by law this is emphatic you can't earn your way to heaven you can't come to the gates of heaven as it were and say let me in because of all the good things I've done in some religions maybe you could try that but in Christianity it says that's wrong won't work not what it's like you don't understand yourself you don't understand God you just don't understand if that's what you think no one will be put right with God by law the only way to be saved is by the grace of Jesus Christ and Paul says this time and time again and he says are you so absolutely thick and stupid that you think that you could be put right with God by the things you've done if that's what you think why on earth did God crucify

Jesus on the cross why did Christ die on the cross if righteousness could be obtained by the law Christ died for nothing do you think God's stupid do you think God put Jesus Christ on the cross when silly old hymn there was a better way and another way of people being saved so emphatically no one will be put right with God by law that's why Jesus died on the cross we're saved by the grace of Christ only item number one item number two we are not married to law Christians are not married to law they are married to Jesus Christ whether it's the Old Testament law or any other law that you care to think of our allegiance is now to Jesus Christ in person that's the voice we need to be listening to that's the one we need to be whose eyes we need to be looking into that's the one whom we need to be following we're married to Jesus

Christ point number three the law this time we are talking about the Old Testament from God it can make people proud and self righteous and hard it kills them it can also point out sin and label it so now I know what coveting is now I understand a little bit more about what's going on in me and this pointing out of sin might be a very long process I'm not quite sure how long Paul has in mind but some people some Christian people will say there was a long long time when I was trying to be a good person and I knew what I should do and I got more and more guilty and more and more confused and more and more tangled up until I saw the simplicity of trusting in Jesus Christ Christ so for example John Bunyan had an experience like that for example

Martin Luther spent many years trying to get himself right with God by following laws there can be a long period where people feel burdened until they see the simplicity of trusting in Jesus Christ but it doesn't have to be a long period I don't think the Bible says that preachers have to tell people unless you've been in a state of guilt and anxiety for X number of weeks months or years you can't be a Christian I think it can be a very short thing think of the woman that Jesus met at the well and he didn't spend a long time saying you know it just says thou shalt not commit adultery what do you think about that go away until you've thought about that for a few months what he did say to her was call your husband and she says I have no husband and Jesus says you're right in saying that you've had five husbands and the man you have now is not your husband and that's all he had to say on this particular matter of her sin so it was a very light touch from the Lord

Jesus the pointing out of sin can be a crippling thing people can be burdened make themselves ill not be able to think of anything else they can be crippled by the accusations that the law brings or it can be very salutary salutary means something that's rather stern but it's good for you if you've never thought that you're a sinner if you've thought oh I'll be a Christian without ever having to confess sin then a little dose of law would actually do you quite a bit of good because you would realise why you need forgiveness and the law can be a heavy thing or it can be a light touch thing which I've really already mentioned so there is a value in the law pointing out sin but the law cannot reduce sin it cannot remove sin all it does is multiply it and complicate sin now I should pause at this point and say

[ 40 : 31 ] I don't think Paul is referring to the presence of 20 mile an hour signs or 30 mile an hour signs or things like that because I think they do help regulate sin but it's not the presence of the law but the fact that you know you're going to get caught actually that's the bit that does the work isn't it it's not the presence of the law it's the fact you're going to get caught so if you happen to be a legislator or an MP or a city councillor or a council officer I wouldn't say I wouldn't want you to go away thinking oh he told me that laws were all rubbish but the law in itself if you tell somebody to be holy the law can't help them to do that the law can't reduce sin or remove sin what it does do is

multiply it and make it more complicated which Paul says is a form of death and the answer is not more law better law the answer is not to live by intimate involvement with the law and its works but the Christian lives in an intimate involvement with Christ by faith in the power of the spirit and as he's going to go on and say this is the key to how the

Christian life is lived effectively not burdening ourselves with guilt not trying to get approval from the things that we've done but by living as it were looking with our eyes on Jesus Christ and receiving his promises receiving his grace receiving his spirit believing his gospel that's the way to live a fruitful life and there we'll finish and we'll take that up again in a couple of weeks time let's sing together