

"The Holy, Righteous and Good Law" Romans 7:7-12

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[0 : 00] The New Testament reading will be Romans 7, verses 7-12. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.

The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing 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.

So, Canadian common law, based on British law, British common law is designed to, in a big part, restrict vice, not necessarily compel virtue.

The purpose of our law is to maintain public order, to prevent harm and protect liberties. It does not force the average citizen to be virtuous, but rather constrains vice.

So, for example, good and enforceable law would be to prohibit theft, not to compel generosity. Or think of it like, well, we just did tax season a couple weeks ago.

[1 : 30] A good law, maybe you disagree with me, a good law is that you have to pay your taxes. A bad law would be that you have to like paying your taxes.

That wouldn't work as well. So, the law works when it comes to communicating the reduction or the restraint of vice, but not the promotion of virtue.

And the underlying principle with all of this is that the individual is not a robot to be programmed, but a person with a variety of motivations and hopes and preferences and loves and the like, all of which cannot and should not be controlled.

So, we're in Romans chapter 7. We're continuing on. We have two more weeks before the summer break. And our text today affirms this underlying principle. And that at the same time shows it to be completely inadequate for the true flourishing of both individual and societal life.

So, for the virtuous life to be realized requires, well, it requires virtue. Not just an absence of vice. And the law can't produce that.

[2 : 46] So, again, looking at Paul's treatment of the law of God in his letter to the church in Rome. And he will show that even the law of God can't produce virtue within us.

And yet, at the same time, godly virtue is impossible without God's law. It's a bit of a paradox here. How do we circle this square?

Well, we're going to jump right into the text. Romans chapter 7, verses 7 to 12. And we'll see that the law of God acts to reveal sin, to provoke sin, and then to ultimately condemn sin.

Reveal sin, provoke sin, condemn sin. We'll jump right into it in verse 7. We'll look at our first point. The law of God reveals sin. So, before we read the verse, Given all that Paul has said about the grace of God thus far, and God's law, one could easily come away with the impression that the law of God is flawed.

It's served a purpose at best. Its time is over. There's something new at work. Maybe even all of what Paul has said would lend to the very idea, at the worst, that God's law is evil.

[4 : 06] It is not right. It is unrighteous. To this, Paul will begin this short six verse, addressing this objection.

And he opens it up like this, starting in verse 7. What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means. The original language in the Greek, it's not just like, hey, that's not true.

It's the most forceful way he could say no. He could easily have just have said, God forbid. How dare you even bring that up? By no means.

Let's continue on. Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet, if the law had not said, you shall not covet.

So what's really interesting here is that the Apostle Paul is talking about how the law itself is the very thing that reveals what sin is. And then he uses a very specific example out of the Ten Commandments.

[5 : 10] The Tenth Commandment is not to covet. And this is the example he uses to illustrate his point. So why the Tenth Commandment? Why the prohibition against coveting?

For two reasons. At least two reasons. The first reason is to communicate to us that sin is very, very pervasive.

It's not a surface level problem, but it's a problem that goes all the way down, all the way deep, right into the human heart. It is not merely a matter of external actions, but internal motivations.

Prohibitions against murder, theft, making idols, honoring parents, or sorry, prohibitions against dishonoring parents, rather. All part of the Ten Commandments.

All prohibitions, all laws that we could, by and large, keep. I mean, people still murder, people still steal. More people than they like to admit dishonor their parents, even as adults.

[6 : 17] Nevertheless, they're external, they can be seen as external actions. Things we do, behaviors that we have towards others, they are external.

But coveting, coveting concerns not the external, but the internal. The posture of the heart. And this is something that cannot be faked or willed.

One can appear as a law-abiding citizen on the outside, but still be a rebellious, envious person on the inside. The law of God, unlike the law of the state, actually commands our interior life, not just to, to prohibit vice, but to promote virtue.

It's really interesting. The law of God is very unlike the law of the state in that regard. And it's different because the law of God, it pierces to the very heart of our being.

And it does this, especially when it pertains to coveting. We find that our motives and attitudes do not ultimately need a tweak or a tune-up, but they need a complete renovation.

[7 : 28] Because the moment we think we have it all, we see somebody else and we realize we are lacking. And seldom, if ever, are we happy for somebody else, but rather instead are upset that we don't have what they have.

Our heart is rebellious. The sin runs all the way down. And so in this regard, it's a brilliant example for Paul to use of this, the reality that sin is a problem all the way down to our very souls, to the depths of our interior lives.

For our interior lives, they cannot be conformed to external standards. We can't will ourselves to not be covetousness, to engage in covetousness.

It's a problem. Really what Paul is saying is, is that the human heart is bent towards a selfish desire all the time.

Our drive is not just for the things we do not have, but the life we believe we deserve. And we engage in this pursuit all the time, and it is never a pursuit that is satisfied, because the issue is not with what we lack, but ultimately, who we lack.

[8 : 50] Okay, we are constantly, if we're going to use this analogy of a desert, we are constantly parched, we are thirsty for the divine. We want something that will satisfy us, not just for a moment, but forever.

So we look to things that are temporal and mortal, and things that are here for a moment, not for eternity, to quench our eternal thirst. And that is why money and experience and people, they cannot satisfy in an ultimate way.

For a moment, for sure. I mean, just this week, if you guys have followed the news, the richest man in the world became the richest, richest man in the world. Okay? Elon Musk is now worth, apparently, over a trillion dollars.

But my guess is that, give it a few years, and a trillion dollars will not be enough. Not because Elon Musk is some monster, but because he's a human being. And temporal things, even that kind of money, which is almost impossible to grasp, a trillion dollars.

It will never be enough. It will never be enough. The hunger will never be satisfied. The thirst will never be quenched.

[10 : 04] Because even a trillion dollars could not last for eternity. And this leads to the second brilliant way that coveting is used by Paul.

Because it describes us, not just as people who have sinned all the way down, but people that are ultimately rebellious. What do I mean? To covet is to be discontent with many of the things in our

life that we cannot change.

And to be envious about those who have what we believe we deserve. So, sometimes this can result in different things.

It's not just, you know, envying the money that people have, but how about the family that they were born into compared to the family that I was born into? The childhood that they had that I should have had.

The financial decisions, of course, that I've made, but maybe the financial decisions that others have made that affect me. I should have that. And all of a sudden, envy starts to grow and it touches on every aspect.

[11:08] The children that they had, whether it's because those children are more well put together or maybe because they had children and we could not. The careers, or lack of them, I mean, the list can go on and on and on.

We are never content. All of life can be a source to make our envious hearts alive with even more envy and growing in even more envy.

We covet the life others have that we do not have. And it is this discontent with our lot which is ultimately a discontent for the sovereignty of God for he has created and he has ordained all things. I mean, we understand this one life that we live and we pine after a possible alternate reality, but maybe one or two.

God in his infinite wisdom and knowledge, he understands the infinite possible realities and yet has chosen the one he has given to us. And on one hand, it seems potentially unfair, but on the other hand, we don't know what those other lives could have been.

[12:19] Nevertheless, God in his sovereign wisdom has ordained the life that we have. So our discontent ultimately with the life that we have if we are discontented, which I would humbly suggest that it is all of us to one degree or another, it is ultimately a problem with God.

And because we have a problem with God's sovereignty, it is incumbent upon us, therefore, to find another king, to live in another kingdom, and often we are the ones that put on the crown and build a new castle and a new throne and we sit upon it.

And we fail to see that God isn't just the king of the universe, but that there is no other king even remotely greater than him.

If we put on the crown and sit on the throne, we will not do a better job. We will not get what we want because ultimately what we want is the king. And the king is God himself.

So therefore, to be discontent with our lot in life, to be truly envious, to covet somebody else, is to say to the sovereign God, to hell with you and your kingdom and your kingly rule, I'm going to be king.

[13:39] And it fails to see that what he truly gives to us to satisfy us is him. That God's the ultimate prize. That everything we have in this life, as good as it is, and it's good, it's wonderful to have finances and material things and to have rich relationships.

I don't want to downplay that, but ultimately these things will not follow us into the life to come. But God wants to give us himself who is the eternal one. And he knows that we long to be deeply satisfied and to have true joy and ultimate rest.

Rest not just for our bodies but for our souls. And he wants to give us himself. He knows that it's only he that can satiate our hungers, only he that can quench our thirst, only he that can provide for all of our needs.

He is the source of life and the wellspring of our flourishing. So the law shows us that sin is a pervasive and rebellious state that affects everyone, all of us.

But it does more than simply reveal what sin is. The law, it also provokes sin. And this can be a bit of a controversial thing, potentially, a potentially damning indictment of the law.

[14:55] So let's continue on. Verse 8, and this brings us to our second point, how the law provokes sin. Actually, it'll be verses 8 and 9.

Let's read. But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.

I was once alive apart from the law. But when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. My kids know and love the fact that I don't like banana bread.

I might be the only person in this room. I don't like it. Never have. They try to trick me. It's a big fun game. And if they could have a poker face, maybe they'd trick me. But they say, we have a

chocolate chip muffin for you, dad, with a big grin.

And then I smell the vile cooked fruit. and I am repelled immediately. And if I was the tyrant of the democratically, the democratic republic of Avatan, I would outlaw this terrible thing.

[16:04] And anybody who mashed a banana into a batter, I don't know, they would be punished. But what I would do if I did that stupid, silly analogy, I would be taking something that's morally neutral and somehow making it morally reprehensible.

There's nothing wrong with bananas. In fact, I like eating a banana if you just peel it. If you do anything else to it, it's a problem. Anyways, I digress. But, you know, reading verses 8 and 9 potentially, potentially, seems like the law makes good actions or maybe morally neutral actions bad actions.

Is that what's happening here? Is God a tyrant, not of the democratic republic of Avatah, but of the entire world? And is he a ruinous, terrible tyrant?

Sometimes we can understand God as that, that God's law is the same as my silly illustration. But there's a serious problem with this kind of thinking as it assumes two very problematic things.

The first, that we are more morally sound than we think we are. And the second is that God is morally compromised or that he is morally compromised full stop.

[17:23] So, if we return to verses 8 and 9, those two assumptions are deeply challenged by Paul. And we're going to just take some time to go through these two assumptions. The first, of course, that we are more morally compromised than we'd like to think, and that, or sorry, we're not as morally sound as we'd like to think, and that God is morally compromised.

So, the first assumption. Paul is saying that the law does not make us sin, but rather provokes sin that's inherently in us. To be a man or woman is to be born with a propensity to sin.

So, sin may lie dormant, but it is certainly not non-existent. Given the opportunity, we will seek to transgress God's law because we are self-serving creatures.

That is why selfishness is always easier than sacrifice. Indulgence is always easier than denial. But it's more than just selfishness.

It's a self-elevation, and I alluded to this in the last point of us elevating ourselves to this new cosmic throne, but it's a self-elevation that causes us to sin.

[18:34] We are rebellious at heart. We desire to sin for its own sake. There's a wonderful illustration in St. Augustine's Confessions where he describes just this.

It's an instance as a young lad with a bunch of other young boys, and they steal from a pear tree. I'll read the quote verbatim, and hopefully you can pick up what Augustine is saying and see how it rings true.

This is what he says, quote, there was a pear tree close to our vineyard, heavily laden with fruit, which was tempting neither for its color nor its flavor. To shake and rob this, some of us wanton young fellows went late one night and carried away great loads, not to eat ourselves, but the fling to the very swine, having only eaten some of them, and to do this pleased us all the more because it was not permitted.

Those pears truly were pleasant to the sight, but it was not for them that my miserable soul lusted, for I had abundance of better, but those I plucked simply that I might steal, for having plucked them I threw them away, my sole gratification in them being my own sin, which I was pleased to enjoy.

See, what St. Augustine is describing here is that the sinful human heart is so perverse and so rebellious towards God that it commits lawlessness simply because it is forbidden.

[20:01] There's a joy in wrongdoing, the excitement, the thrill, the adrenaline of engaging in something that you know is wrong for the first time, and maybe you could get caught, but I'm going to get away with this.

God help me. It is an excitement in the forbidden, a curiosity that is not the type of curiosity that leads to virtue, but a curiosity that is excited to explore vice.

It's the very thing that enlivens the sin that lives and resides within us. So you see, it is not the law that plants sin in our hearts by giving us a command and taking something morally neutral or even something morally good and making it bad.

Rather, it awakens the sin that was until then dormant within us. This is ultimately an act of God's kindness, though, and love, which helps us push back against the second assumption that God is morally compromised.

And to that point, we'll say this, the law is not some kind of arbitrary thing that God has just deemed to be so, as if God made up a long list of do's and don'ts just to mess with us.

[21 : 17] He's some mean kid with the magnifying glass just zapping ants on a sidewalk. The law is God's will revealed. It is an expression of his goodness and love.

It is given to us for our benefit, and not just our benefit, but our ultimate joy. It helps us to see who he is. It helps restrain evil. It helps lead us to him.

And therefore, if sin takes the law and seeks to contradict it for no other reason than to be in contravention of God's law, then the law does precisely one of its functions.

Namely, it provokes sin so that it can be seen for what it truly is. Now, consider this, okay? Christine and I, we moved to Stitzville six years ago this summer, I think.

Six years ago this summer. But we began the house search seven years ago. It took us a year to find the place. There's like a little break in between. But one of the houses we saw initially, it looked really nice on the outside.

[22 : 22] It worked. It was a great lot. We wanted to go through with it. This is before things were crazy and you put a bid on something you saw for five minutes and no home inspection. So we wanted to get a home inspection. The house looked great.

The home inspector came in. We paid, I don't know, three, four hundred bucks, something like that. And he came with a long list of stuff. Listen, you don't want to buy this house. You're going to have to sink in tens of thousands of dollars that's not worth it.

And even then, you don't know what you're going to find if you open up this. And there might be mold here. And the list went on and on and on. The law acts kind of like a home inspector.

What it does is it reveals, it provokes what is lying underneath the surface so that we can see it for what it is. the home inspector is not the one who somehow created mold in joists or underneath floorboards.

It's not like the inspector, he pulled up some pipe and looked around and changed it to lead just to bother us. He just simply revealed what was already there.

[23 : 27] This is what the law does. It's one of the functions of the law. It's actually a huge, wonderful blessing for it provokes what is already there. So that we can see it for what it is.

This rebellion, this sin in our hearts, it goes all the way down. It is a complete affront to God's law and God's ways and who he is. So then ultimately this provocation of the law or provocation of sin by the law rather, to what end is it?

So that we might see sin for what it is and that sin will be condemned in us. And this leads us to our third and final point verses 10 and 11. read with me verses 10 and 11.

The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin seizing an opportunity through the commandment deceived me and through it killed me.

It seems actually like Paul was living a great life and then the law came and it did exactly what some of these detractors of Paul insinuated. That sin is actually the cause of death.

[24 : 34] Sin is the cause of sin. The law is the cause of sin. The law is the cause of death. But not so. See, sin is revealed and provoked by the law so that it can ultimately be condemned.

Sin is shown to be utterly deceptive. Sin always promises the very thing we desire even more than we could hope yet it never gives what it promises.

It promises life. It promises a deep heart satisfaction and contentment if only we have, if only we achieve, if only we enjoy. But instead it encourages us to pursue selfish aims, to hold on to bitterness, to envy, to give into fear and to anger and discontent.

I mean, the very idea that we can live our way and to hell with anybody else that pushes back against us, this is a recipe not for a flourishing life, but a life that is going to be riddled, riddled with broken relationships and hard heartedness, an inability to reconcile.

I met up with somebody, a parishioner this week, and just briefly talked about how Christians have a superpower and we don't use it too often, but it is to apologize without reservation.

[26 : 06] A very powerful thing. We don't often do it. Oftentimes if we apologize, I'll speak for myself, oftentimes when I apologize, it's because I'm tired or it's because I was stressed out or I got kind of high strung with this or that, there's always a reason behind it kind of excusing, but you know, something about knowing the forgiveness of God allows us to say I'm sorry, but also on the flip side, to receive an apology and to extend forgiveness.

Okay? Sin promises that we don't have to deal with any of that, we can live our own life, and it seems very wonderful, and it seems like there's something so satisfying about holding on to bitterness.

Okay? And what that does is it does not make us happy people. It doesn't make us joyful people or kind people. It twists us up inside. Sin promises, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, put up boundaries against everybody who bothers you.

And listen, boundaries are important in specific situations, okay? So I don't want to be misunderstood, but oftentimes we just say, no, no, no, no, I'm boundaries. Okay? But really it's just saying, I don't want to deal with you.

You end up isolating yourself. You end up becoming a bitter person, and the promise of sin falls utterly short. It's not a recipe for the good life, a life that flourishes with joy and is free from internal strife.

[27 : 40] It's the opposite. Okay? It's the opposite. So what does the law do? The law condemns sin in us, okay? It reveals sin, it provokes sin, but then it condemns sin.

How? By calling sin's bluff. If selfish and self-serving living is the recipe for success, let's see it. Let's see the fruit of the way you're going to live sin, right?

If you're going to engage in sinful behavior, let's see the fruit of it. And sin, what it'll do, it'll always take what is good and holy and twist and malign it, failing to embrace goodness, life, and light, but rather living in evil and death and darkness.

I mean, consider what Paul is saying here. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me, for sin's seizing opportunity, through the commandment deceived me, and through it killed me.

What Paul is saying really briefly is that sin says, listen, you don't have to follow the law. You will live a better life, but the law is there, and we are condemned, and we see that sin is utterly sinful.

[28 : 47] It can give us nothing that we want, and we are seen to be what we truly are, people that are dead in our trespasses. The very commandment that was given to show God's character and lead us to life instead brought death upon us because our sinful flesh took advantage of this opportunity to be content with God's goodness and instead rebelled against his good and loving rule.

We're condemned. The decision is death and it is final. But you see, unlike our common law here in Canada, the law of God doesn't merely seek to, again, limit vice, but it compels virtue, and a virtue we cannot achieve yet we desperately need for true joy and deep satisfaction.

So there's this teaching around the Ten Commandments that they're just not simply prohibitions but whatever they prohibit, it's also the opposite is commanded.

So for instance, Jesus, he talks about murder and how murder isn't just not stabbing somebody, shooting somebody, killing somebody, but it's actually working towards their goodness, their prosperity.

It's about helping them to live into joy and life as much as you are able to. In the same way, the prohibition against stealing isn't just to not take what is not yours, but is to be generous with what you have.

[30 : 21] And same with coveting, it is not just to not envy somebody, but to rejoice in the victory of other people. And yet those virtues are sorely, sorely needed, but almost impossible, if not completely impossible, to achieve.

Jesus sums up the law with the command to love. We read it this morning, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, to love our neighbor as ourselves.

So you see that the law of God is far more than just a prohibition against harm, but a command to bless, a command to give, a command to share and lay down our lives for the sake of God and for those around us.

And yet we have seen that this is an impossibility okay? It's like we see the prize, but we can never touch it.

We can see the finish line, we can never get there. But what if the law, by revealing, provoking, and condemning sin, was also a guide pointing us to the one who has kept the law and fulfilled the law and all its requirements, the one who lived without vice, the one who lived perfectly virtuously, and who didn't just expose and provoke and condemn sin, but actually defeated sin once and for all?

[31 : 41] And what if that one offers to pay our just penalty for the sins we have committed, for the bitterness that we hold, for the envy, for the anger, for the angst, and not just pay our penalty, but

give us a new heart, and give us his Holy Spirit so that we can begin, by his help, walking in this virtuous life, the life that promises, okay, promises joy and satisfaction, but will deliver it as well.

This is the gospel. This is the gospel of Christ. This is the good news that the law, although it condemns us, it points us to the one who fulfilled the law, the one that gave us grace because of love.

So Christianity ultimately is not primarily a faith of ethics, so that the more we do, the higher we achieve, the greater place in heaven we will enjoy in the afterlife.

No, it's rather a faith that knows how dark our souls truly are and doesn't ultimately leave us without hope, but rather offers us the only way, in fact, the only one that can free us from our sinful selves and free us for deep loving satisfaction, knowing God's love for eternity.

In the same confession, St. Augustine opens with this, you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

[33 : 21] sin. So, the question that the apostle asks in verse 7, what then shall we say? That the law is sin? Well, he answers the question by the time we get to verse 12, and this is what he says.

So, the law is holy, the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Why? Because it leads us to the one that gives us rest for our souls. So, friends, let us find our rest in Christ, not in the things that sin promises, but in the one who conquered sin itself.