

# **Romans: The Good News of God**

## **A Defense of the Law**

*Romans 7:7-13*

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# A Defense of the Law

## Scripture

Paul's letter to the Romans is a wonderful treatment of God's plan of salvation. One prominent aspect in Romans is Paul's treatment of the law of God and its role in our coming to faith in Christ, and then living for Christ. Let us read Romans 7:7-13:

**<sup>7</sup> What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! 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."<sup>8</sup> But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.<sup>9</sup> I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.<sup>10</sup> The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.<sup>11</sup> For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.<sup>12</sup> So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.**

**<sup>13</sup> Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. (Romans 7:7-13)**

## Introduction

The letter to the Romans is the apostle Paul's masterpiece on salvation. He teaches us—in theological language—how God saves us. He tells us how God saves us from the penalty, power and presence of sin. Thus, the letter to the Romans is the good news of God.

In Romans 7:1-6, the last section we studied, the apostle Paul indicated that Christians have been released from the law, having

died to that which formerly bound us. This does not mean that Christians are free from obligations to the law. In fact, Paul stresses that Christians now “serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code” (7:6).

But, at this point someone may raise an objection: “Paul, you have said that Christians have died to sin in the death of Christ (6:1-14), and you have followed that by saying that we have also died to the law (7:1-6). Are you not putting sin and the law in the same category? Are you not implying, if not actually saying, that the law is sinful?”

It is to this topic the apostle now turns his attention.

### Lesson

The objection raised is stated by the apostle in Romans 7:7a: **“What then shall we say? That the law is sin?”** In other words, “Was the law given by God through Moses actually evil? And can Christians now disregard the law and live as they please?”

Paul responds with an emphatic negative: **“By no means!”** (cf. 3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:13). The law not only is *not* sinful but in fact continues to have great value for Christians. The law of God is not sinful. It is good.

Let’s notice four good things that the law does.

#### I. The Law Reveals Sin (7:7)

The first good thing that the law does is that it reveals sin.

Paul says in Romans 7:7b: **“Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.”**

God has revealed his righteous standards to us through **the law**. We **would not have known** what **sin** was if we did not have God’s law. But God has given us the law and therefore we know what sin is. Paul has already alluded to this in Romans 3:20 where he said that “through the law comes knowledge of sin.”

Now, Paul is not speaking of humanity’s general awareness of right and wrong. Even pagans who have never heard of God’s

revealed law nevertheless “show that the work [or requirements, *NIV*] of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them” (Romans 2:15). In this verse Paul is speaking about the law showing us the full extent of our personal **sin**.

Throughout the rest of the chapter, Paul uses the first person singular pronouns **I** and **me**, indicating that he is giving his personal testimony, as well as teaching universal truth.

He is relating the conviction of sin that the Holy Spirit worked in his own heart through **the law** before and during his Damascus road encounter with Christ and the three days of blindness that followed (see Acts 9:1-18).

Paul, you recall, had been trained in Judaism since his early youth, had studied under the famous Gamaliel in Jerusalem, had tried to follow the law meticulously, and had considered himself to be zealous for God (Acts 22:3; Galatians 1:13-14; Philippians 3:5-6a). Before his conversion, he easily could have prayed the prayer of the self-satisfied Pharisee in the Temple who thanked God that he was not like other people (see Luke 18:11-12). He may have asserted with the rich young ruler that he had kept all the law since his youth (see Matthew 19:20; Philippians 3:6b).

During his pre-salvation experience of conviction, Paul however came to realize that the most important demands of God’s revealed law were not *external* but *internal* and that he had failed to meet them.

It is significant that the apostle chose the most obviously *internal* injunction of the Ten Commandments to illustrate his personal experience that the law reveals sin.

**“For I would not have known what it is to covet,”** he explained, **“if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’”** It may have been the growing awareness of his own covetousness that finally broke his pride and opened his heart to his own sin and the transforming work of the Spirit.

The real battle with sin is internal, in the heart and mind. Counseling, therapy, or even strong willpower often can modify a

person's behavior. People may stop drinking by faithfully following the plan of Alcoholics Anonymous or stop lying or cheating by submitting to psychotherapy.

But only the transforming power of the Holy Spirit can take a sinful heart and make it pure and acceptable to God. The law's part in that transformation is to make us aware of our sin and of our need for divine forgiveness and redemption.

John Paton was a missionary to the New Hebrides (or Vanuatu, as it is known today) from 1858 until 1897. When he went to the New Hebrides he encountered a "stone age" culture of men and women committed to savagery and superstition and cannibalism. His wife and child died shortly after they arrived in New Hebrides and he literally had to sleep on their graves for several days so that the Islanders would not dig up their graves and eat them. He labored against tremendous difficulties and trials but eventually these cannibals came to faith in Christ. What changed these cannibals into Christians? The Islanders did not know that cannibalism was a sin until they heard that the law of God say, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). The law of God made them aware of their sin against God and of their need for divine forgiveness and redemption. And then the Holy Spirit changed their hearts and gave them the gift of faith and a new life.

Has the law of God revealed your sin to you? I don't mean that you have a vague sense of right and wrong. But, do you know—in your heart—that you have broken God's law as it is revealed most clearly in the Decalogue?

That, then, is the first purpose of the law: it reveals our sin.

## II. The Law Arouses Sin (7:8)

The second good thing that the law does is that it arouses sin.

The law gives sin the opportunity to be aroused, working every kind of evil. Note the exact words of Paul in verse 8a: **"But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the**

**law, sin lies dead.”** That is, sin uses the commandment. Sin is *not within* the commandment; it is *separate* from it. The commandment or law is not sinful. Sin is within us and not within the law.

Once the law of God comes into our lives it arouses sin, it activates sin, it creates a surge of rebellion in our hearts. The rebellion has been there all along. That is what it means to be a sinner. To be a sinner means to be a rebel against God. But when the law comes into our lives, this dormant rebellion is aroused from its slumber, as it were, and we discover it in our hearts.

Saint Augustine, in his autobiography titled *Confessions*, describes how this principle worked in his life:

There was a pear tree near our vineyard, laden with fruit. One stormy night we rascally youths set out to rob it and carry our spoils away. We took off a huge load of pears. . . not to feast upon ourselves, but to throw them to the pigs, though we ate just enough to have the pleasure of forbidden fruit. They were nice pears, but it was not the pears that my wretched soul coveted, for I had plenty better at home. I picked them simply in order to become a thief. The only feast I got was a feast of iniquity, and that I enjoyed to the full. What was it that I loved in that theft? Was it the pleasure of acting against the law, in order that I, a prisoner under rules, might have a maimed counterfeit of freedom by doing what was forbidden, with a dim similitude of omnipotence? The desire to steal was awakened simply by the prohibition of stealing.<sup>1</sup>

The desire to sin is aroused by the law. The desire to steal—in Augustine’s case—was simply aroused by the law that says, “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15).

The late James Montgomery Boice gives a similar illustration of the law creating a desire within us to sin in ways that we have not even thought of before:

One spring, when I was in the sixth grade, our school principal came into the classroom just before we were to be released to

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<sup>1</sup> John Huffman, Jr., *Who’s in Charge Here?* (Chappaqua, NY: Christian Herald Books, 1981) 116-117.

go home for lunch. He said he had heard that some of the students had been bringing firecrackers to school, and he wanted to say that this was definitely not allowed. Firecrackers were dangerous. They were against Pennsylvania state law. If any of his students even brought a firecracker into school, even if he did not set it off, he would be expelled from school immediately. He would never be able to come back.

Well! I did not own any firecrackers. I had not even been thinking about firecrackers. But, you know, when you get to thinking about firecrackers that really is an intriguing subject. And as I thought about them I remembered that one of my friends had some.

On the way home for lunch a friend and I went by this other friend's house, picked up a firecracker, and returned to school with it forty-five minutes later. We went into the cloakroom, invited another boy to come with us, and said, "You hold the firecracker by the middle of the fuse. Pinch it very tight. Then we will light it. The others will think that it is going to explode. But when it burns down to your fingers it will go out, and everything will be all right."

What we had not counted on was that the lighted fuse would burn our friend's fingers. When it did, our friend dropped the firecracker. It exploded in an immense cloud of blue smoke and tiny bits of white paper, in the midst of which we emerged, a bit shaken, from the closet.

You cannot imagine how loud a firecracker sounds in an old school building with high ceilings, marble floors, and plaster walls! Nor can you imagine how quickly a principal can rush out of his office, down the hall, and into one of the classrooms. The principal was there even before my friends and I had staggered through the cloakroom's open door. He was as stunned as we were, though differently. I remember him saying over and over again, after we had been sent home and had come back to his office with our parents, "I had just made the announcement. I had just told them not to bring any firecrackers into school. I just can't believe it."<sup>2</sup>

That is what the law does. It not only reveals sin to us; it also

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<sup>2</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Romans, Volume 2: The Reign of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 742-743.

arouses sin within us. God gives us his commands and we rebel against him by doing the very opposite of what he commands.

Have you noticed this within yourself?

### III. The Law Ruins the Sinner (7:9-11)

The third good thing that the law does is that it ruins the sinner.

The law brings us to the end of ourselves. Notice how Paul expresses it in verses 9-11: **“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 an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.”**

Exactly what does Paul mean? In what sense was Paul **once “alive apart from law”**? Was he ever without knowledge of the law? And in what sense had he **died**?

Paul means simply, as Augustine, Calvin, and others have said, that he was alive in the sense that sin within him was not yet active. He was living the life of an *unconvicted* sinner, without remorse and in the enjoyment of his unbelieving life. When the law came home to him, that which was inactive became active, and he realized that he was really dead.

Paul, you remember, saw himself as one who was in good standing before God. If ever there was anyone who had pleased God, Paul thought, it was surely himself. He had sought to obey the law of God; in fact, he prided himself on how well he did obey the law of God.

When the law finally began to get through to Paul to do its proper work, he saw that he was actually guilty of breaking the law. And furthermore, he saw that instead of wanting to keep the law, he in fact wanted to break it. Instead of driving sin out, it aroused sin. He saw how hopeless his sinful condition was.

But that is a good thing! As long as Paul thought that he was doing well in the sight of God by his own efforts at keeping the



law, he was in fact on his way to hell. It was only when he learned that he was actually spiritually dead that he was ready to receive the good news of the gospel.

The late Dr. John Gerstner, who taught at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, was preaching on Romans and expounding the law. He was preaching on how the law ruins the sinner by stripping away the veil to reveal our human depravity. After the service, a woman approached him. She was holding up her hand with her index finger and thumb about a half-inch apart, and she said, “Dr. Gerstner, you make me feel this big!”

Dr. Gerstner replied, “But, Madam, that’s too big. That’s much too big. Don’t you realize that that much self-righteousness will take you to hell?”<sup>3</sup>

He was right. The law is intended by God to ruin us in the sense of driving out all our self-righteousness so that we might look to Jesus Christ alone for grace and salvation.

Has the law of God ruined you? Has the law of God shown you that you cannot please God one tiny bit with your efforts to obey his law?

#### **IV. The Law Reflects the Magnitude of Sin (7:12-13)**

And finally, the fourth good thing that the law does is that it reflects the magnitude of sin.

The law is not sin. Paul says in verse 12: **“So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”**

The law does exactly what God intends it to do, and that purpose is good. The fact that the law reveals sin, arouses sin, and ruins the sinner does not make the law wicked.

When a person is justly convicted and sentenced for murder, there is no fault in the law or with those responsible for upholding it. The fault is with the one who broke the law.

Once again anticipating a question that would naturally come

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<sup>3</sup> Boice, 746.

to mind in light of what he has said, Paul asks, “**Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?**” (7:13a). And once again Paul answers his own question with a resounding, “**By no means!**”

To use again the analogy of the murder trial, it is not the law against murder but the committing of murder that merits punishment. The law itself is good; it is the breaking of it that is evil. How much more is God’s law **good**, and how much more evil is the breaking of it.

It is not the law that is the cause of spiritual death but rather it is sin. The law reveals and arouses sin **in order that sin might be shown to be sin**. Sin’s deadly character is exposed under the pure light of God’s law.

God has given his holy, righteous, and good law in order that **through the commandment sin might become sinful beyond measure**. Therefore, the preaching of the law is necessary to the preaching of the gospel. Until we see our sin for what it is, we will not see our need of salvation from it.

The law, then, reveals the magnitude of our sin, and that’s a good thing.

## Conclusion

One of the purposes of the law is to drive us to faith in Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the demands of the law on behalf of sinners who trust in his righteousness instead of our own.

Although Robert Murray McCheyne died in 1843 at the age of thirty, he left God’s people a great treasure in his memoirs and other writings. In his poem “Jehovah Tsidkenu,” which means, “The Lord Our Righteousness,” he testifies:

I once was a stranger to grace and to God,  
I knew not my danger, and felt not my load;  
Though friends spoke in rapture of Christ on the tree,  
Jehovah Tsidkenu was nothing to me.

I oft read with pleasure, to soothe or engage,

Isaiah's wild measure and John's simple page;  
But even when they pictured the blood-sprinkled tree,  
Jehovah Tsidkenu seemed nothing to me.

Like tears from the daughters of Zion that roll,  
I wept when the waters went over His soul,  
Yet thought not that my sins had nailed to the tree  
Jehovah Tsidkenu—'twas nothing to me.

When free grace awoke me by light from on high,  
Then legal fears shook me, I trembled to die;  
No refuge, no safety in self could I see—  
Jehovah Tsidkenu my Savior must be.

My terrors all vanished before the sweet name;  
My guilty fear banished, with boldness I came  
To drink at the fountain, life-giving and free—  
Jehovah Tsidkenu is all things to me.

Jehovah Tsidkenu! My treasure and boast,  
Jehovah Tsidkenu! I ne'er can be lost;  
In Thee shall I conquer by flood and by field—  
My cable, my anchor, my breastplate and shield!

Even treading the valley; the shadow of death,  
This "watchword" shall rally my faltering breath;  
For while from life's fever my God sets me free,  
Jehovah Tsidkenu my death-song shall be.

McCheyne experienced the same conviction of sin as did the apostle Paul. When he saw himself in the full light of God's law, he realized he was ruined and dead and had no hope but in the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The law of God reveals our sin, arouses our sin, ruins us and reflects the magnitude of our sin. Our only hope is in the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us thank God for his law, which is holy, righteous and good, and then surrender to his grace. Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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**PRAAYER:**

From Ray Ortlund's, *A Passion for God*:

O God, we have not produced a single righteous moment in our entire lives. We have overrated our virtue and underestimated the depth and power of our sinfulness.

We are deeply corrupt.

O Holy Christ, be our righteousness!

Cover all our sins with your merit.

And then work your holiness deep down into the secret recesses of our souls, where we cannot put it, where no therapist can put it, where no drug can put it, but where it must penetrate if we are to be the holy persons we ought to be, were recreated to be, and long to be.

And all of this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.