

The Law: A Holy Imaging of our Soul
Romans 7:7-12

“Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin”

Introduction: Imaging have come a long way over the last couple of centuries. The first known photograph was taken in 1826 in France, taking hours to develop a blurry view out a window, appropriately titled *“View from the Window at Le Gras”*. Less than a hundred years later, the x-ray was discovered in 1895, and used safely (ish) by 1920, giving doctors and medical workers insight into the skeletal structure of their patients. In a lot of your lifetimes, the **MRI** machine was invented and put into regular practice in hospitals, safely producing detailed, cross-sectional, 2D or 3D images of soft tissues, organs, and bones. Advancing on x-ray’s, it offers radiation free ability to detect tumors, infections, brain hemorrhages, or to evaluate joint, vascular, and neurological conditions.

How many have experienced an MRI exam? It’s loud and nightmarish for the claustrophobic, but it can absolutely be game changing. Eleven years ago, we brought Erin to Simi hospital after she had symptoms of something major going on in her body that came on like an avalanche. She entered the **MRI** machine which found a significant clot in her brain, causing a stroke, accounting for all the symptoms. This allowed doctors to pinpoint the problem, administer the clot buster called TPA, and allow blood to flow once again in her brain with minimal long term effects.

Now, what was the purpose of the imaging? It was NOT to cure but to diagnose. It was NOT the cause of the stroke but it gave a clear image of the problem. It was NOT to blame for it, but rather exposed what was already there. It had the power to reveal but no power to heal.

*This is the law in the life of a believer...or at least that is the argument Paul advances in the next section of Romans 7. The law shows us, images in 3D, what is going on in our heart and what still needs to be sanctified. We have seen that the law cannot save (Rom. 3-5), cannot sanctify on its own (Rom. 6) and cannot condemn us (Rom. 7:1-6). In fact, we have **died to the law** so that we can now *belong to or be married to Christ*, and now we live under a **new covenant, with the law of love dictating, with a new Spirit to empower and guide**. Because of this, we can bear true fruit for God (7:4) and serve Him in a new way, not trying to keep an old way through a written code (7:6) but by the Spirit. But all of this would beg the question: ***is the law somehow bad or sinful? What good IS it if we have died TO it?*** Those are the questions we will answer in this section this morning.*

A Few Preliminary Considerations to Consider:

- **Justification** means we are declared righteous by Christ, where He gives us His righteousness and our sin is put on Him. This is given to us by grace through **faith alone**, and cannot be obtained by ANY kind of earning, keeping, or doing.
Sanctification is both an immediate and necessary outflow of justification, and is a *work of God’s grace in our life of **progressing** in holiness, **cleansing** our minds and hearts of sin, and **becoming** transformed into the likeness of Jesus*. What Paul is dealing with in this text is the believers **sanctification, NOT justification**.
- **Sanctification** brings a new view of SIN in our lives: **Positionally**, sin is dead and powerless against us, since we are now IN Christ; **Practically**, sin is deceptive and prowling like a lion to try

get us to believe the lie that sin will satisfy. A true mark of **justification** is a growing **hatred** of sin, rather than a casual comfortability with it.

- **Since we belong to Christ**, the new heart we have to LOVE Him plays out in **active OBEDIENCE** in all of His commands. There is no such thing as having Jesus as our Savior but NOT our Lord. To put it another way, there is no way to be justified and not be sanctified. Or, you cannot say you are saved and love God and live apart from seeking to obey Christ (1 John 5:2 - *By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments*).
- **God demands and expects WHOLE-HEARTED WORSHIP of Him alone** – Sin resides in our minds and hearts as well as our hands. It affects our **inner man**, not just our **outer actions**. Thus, battling to hate our sin and turning to holiness is NOT a mere external fight but rather a battle of **lords**, who is in control of our lives. This is exactly what God demanded in the OT with Israel. We see it in the **10 commandments**: *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. “You shall have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:2-3).* When Israel violated this command, God made it abundantly clear:

Jeremiah 2:11-13 -*Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit.*
¹² *Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD,
¹³ for my people have **committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and
hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water***

God did not condemn merely because He looked at a scorecard of sin – that’s how WE judge! No, God ALWAYS wanted full hearted worshippers who would love Him, follow Him, learn from Him, enjoy Him, rest in Him, revel in Him, trust Him, and be satisfied in Him...ALONE. The way to do WAS/IS not to try to keep a bunch of rules. That was the path the **Pharisees** and religious leaders took in Jesus’ day, thinking that if they kept the Law and every iteration of it – they came up with **613 in the Mitzvot** --- to try to make themselves acceptable to the Lord. For them, the Law provided **specifics** to follow, rather than whole hearted worship. The Pharisees were like the overreaching **HOA people** who have a scorecard and make sure everyone follows it --- which actually de-motivates people from keeping it.

So, if we are going to love God in Christ with our whole heart, we MUST deal with our sin. And if sin originates in our inner man, we must deal with it there. And how do we **know** the sin of the inner man? That is where the law comes in, as an imaging machine for our heart, mind, and soul. Not the cure, but the revealer, not to solve but to show, not to save but to drive us to our Great Physician who can.

The Good Law Correctly Images (reveals) our sin (7:7, 12)

*“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.**”*

*“So the law is **holy**, and the commandment is **holy and righteous and good**”*

In the rolling out of his argument that we have died to the law and thus it is no longer binding, some might infer that the law is **worthless** at best and **evil** at worst. But Paul quickly clarifies the fact that the law is God’s, given by Him, reflecting His nature and character, and is by definition **holy, righteous, and good**. Far from being sinful, it is actually perfect. The problem we have is misconstruing the law as something that it is not, and seeking from it something it never offers. *So how is it good?*

1. **We need to know our sin in order to fight against it** – If we start having numbness in our toes or pain shooting out from our chest, it could mean many different things. It could mean we sat wrong and our foot is just asleep. It could mean we have some sort of heartburn from something that we ate. Or it could mean we have onset diabetes or a heart problem (Most of us in our marriages are divided over which it would be). The only way to know for sure is to have some sort of imaging or bloodwork done to confirm. The law enlightened us about our sin, defining what God wants and demands, and though we have a God-given conscience to know it's always wrong to murder or lie (Rom. 2:14-16), the law confirms that fact.
2. **The law allows us to know our sin without having to EXPERIENCE that sin** – Some falsely believe the only way they can learn is the hard way. We can easily get deceived into thinking that somehow we need to test the line that God has drawn to truly see if what He said is true. But the law allows us to see what God both **prohibits and promotes**, which are **BOTH designed for our good**. Pleasing, knowing, and trusting God is an act of faith that takes Him at His Word, believing He knows best and desires our good. When we venture out on our own, we become exactly like **Adam and Eve** in the Garden, saying to ourselves “*Did God really say*”, or “*Is God really good to us?*”

A word to young (and not so young) people – This is the thinking of far too many of us when we are young and venturing out for the first time, so can I say a few things to our younger folks in the room. There is a thinking in us when we are young that goes like this: *I love Jesus, and definitely want a relationship, not religion. So I will participate in singing praise when it meets my particular style and preference, but I'm not completely ready to yield everything to Him.* So I will dabble. Yes, the Bible is clear on things like being drunk and out of control, but that has always been kept from me, so I'd like to give it a whirl and see. I know we have been taught NOT to engage in any type of sexual relationship outside of marriage, knowing that it is a worshipful joy IN marriage, but I'd like to see for myself. And what happens as a result? **Joy? Satisfaction? Freedom?** No, we are plagued by *regret, shame, and consequences*. YES, there is forgiveness and newness to be had in repentance, but we should never **presume on God**. Presuming on the goodness of love and grace is utterly unloving, and treats God like someone who does our bidding.

3. **Paul uses *coveting* as a telling illustration** – The word “*covet*” is not really a word we throw around today, but the word Paul uses is *epithumia*, a word that means **deep desire or lust**. Now, this desire can either be good or bad, based on the object desired and purpose behind it, but in this context, he is dealing with negative desires. To covet, on one hand, is to desire something someone else has --- seeing their house, vacation, family ---- and lusting after that, but on the other hand, it also expresses **discontent** with what you DO have. Coveting is such a big deal because every expression of discontentment is a thumbing our nose at God for NOT giving us more or what we **really want**. So, coveting or wrong desires here are unique because it is **primarily a sin of our inner man** (and bookend with the 1st commandment which does the same thing). It is different than **murder or stealing**, which *infers* an inner issue – I murder because hate you or steal because I want what you have and take it --- but coveting does not deal primarily with *action, but with desire*.

Now, this is truly important to understand the **MRI picture of our sin**. We sin *externally* for sure when the words come out of our mouth hurting others or cursing God, stealing, etc. This first level is like a **picture** taken --- it tells us what we are doing *out there*. But this external part of sin is NOT all, and only **focusing on it gets us morality but no true change. This means that we must deal with our desires,**

lusts, and passions that originate in our heart. Coveting is **internal**, but screams against God's lordship in our lives. The law functions like an **x-ray** and helps us see that our desires are not the means of what is true and false, right or wrong. The only way that we can deal with this level of sin is through the **New Covenant reality** that we've been given a NEW HEART, a clean heart (Ps. 51:10), an undivided heart (Psa. 86:11), a heart that is controlled by the love of Christ (2 Cor. 5:12-14). We must not only be **transformed from the inside out; we must obey from the inside out as well.**

But there is yet another level of imaging that must take place.

Sin Leverages the Law for its own Insidious Purposes (7:8-11)

*But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, **produced in me all kinds of covetousness.** For apart from the law, **sin** lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, **sin came alive and I died.** 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For **sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, **deceived me and through it killed me*****

Paul now shifts the discussion from the use of the law as a revealer of sin, which is good, and shows the **insidious and sinister usage of the law by sin itself.** Notice that verse 8 and 11 bookends the argument, that sin *seizes an opportunity through the commandment* to wreak havoc in the life of mankind. Notice **three things** that happens when sin does this:

1. **Sin went from a RESULT of to a PRODUCER of more sin** – Look back at verse 8. Paul is not pointing out “*sins*” plural, but the problem of sin itself, that it PRODUCES more covetousness in us. This is the **MRI image** that the law gives us, the un-pixelated version of a scan of our inner man. We not only DO sin that comes out of misplaced affections and desires, but there is a level even deeper that resides below the other two, and that is the fact that we are sinful to the core. We are depraved. Now, a believer has been given a new heart and new affections for sure, but sinfulness is STILL present and must be fought. Because this is the case, the law actually can cause our **sin to flare up MORE than before it was exposed.** We saw this in the story of Amnon and Tamar in **2 Samuel 13**, where Amnon burned with passion for his sister, and was given ample opportunity to stop his violating of her. The STOP sign was given, then a plea to ask for marriage in keeping with the law, but those prohibitions only caused MORE lust. When he got what he thought would satisfy, he left with hatred and shame in his heart.
2. **When sin uses the law, it leverages our REBELLIOUS heart** – What did Paul mean by saying that apart from the law, sin was dead, and that when the commandment came alive, he died? I think this plays out two ways. First, we know that even before the law came, sin was present. So one does not have to have knowledge of the law to violate God's holiness, but the law brings clarity to our actions and desires. We learned that from the beginning, mankind wants to be **autonomous and glories in self-deification.** We want our own way, do not want anyone telling us something against our desires, and we will get rid of anyone that stands in our way. You can look back at Adam and Eve but you can simply go to the playground at Grace Elementary to see this. Two boys have a squabble over a ball or place in line, and one who does not get his way decides to push the other. *Did he violate a known law?* Maybe, maybe not. But the teacher comes over and in no uncertain terms in her teacher voice that this kind of behavior is UNACCEPTABLE. *Does this stop the agitator?* Maybe for a time, but given a similar situation later in the day, the same situation plays out again, and it ramps up the ramifications and discipline. Sin was active before, but the law (teacher) created death.

2) In Paul's life, he had operated according to the "old way of the written code" (7:6), which was a misunderstanding of the true purpose of the law. So he operated in a way that *thought* he was alive, but it never could deliver on its promise. Though he kept the law fastidiously, it was all garbage (Phil. 3:8). No, sin was using the law in Paul's life to keep him from the giver of the law, which would have led to ultimate death. But this sheds light on a final and important look at the way sin operates.

3. **Sin operates out of DECEPTION** – Sin is ultimately powerless against the finished work of Christ, but that does not mean it does not go down without a fight. This should not shock us, since Satan operates as a lying liar who tells lies, a murderer, and does all of this out of His own character (John 8:44-45). Sin wants us to look at the law, but not too closely, and find assurance in our keeping the law by morality, NOT our depravity.

This is what Jesus called "The Broad Way", the way that MANY believe they will enter heaven, which is path that is both wide and easy, but leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13). The shout is, "Look at the law! You are good! You are no murderer! Yeah you've told a lie or disrespected your parents, but who hasn't. Compared most, you are *good, baby!* Believe there's a God, make sure to have feelings about Jesus, and do some good things, and DO NOT WORRY ABOUT THE REST." There is a vast amount of people who live a version of this, thinking they are good to go, and will be found in the end to have ONLY a righteousness that they could produce, which will only qualify them for judgment.

And sin works against those who are truly justified to make them believe they can be sanctified by keeping the law alone, and that sin does not matter. If sin and Satan cannot take our salvation away, the next best thing is to keep us bound to the old way of the law, thinking that we need to earn standing with God, or keeping us away from evaluating our heart so that we can deal with our sin rightly. When we **recognize our sin, we can fight it, and we can hate it.**

So what do we do when we get the MRI results produced by the law?

- **First, examine your own heart and life, NOT someone else** – Far too often we think the problem lies somewhere else with someone else. But here, we need to let God's law image our heart and inner self at every level, including our actions, motives, desires, and foundation. Are we operating from our own will? Trying to be in control? Neglecting clear commands that God has given? Giving into clear prohibitions?
- **Second, repent from the sin that is exposed** – Repentance gets a bad rap sometimes, like it's a negative nitpicker. But repentance is turning FROM something TO something. Repentance is life giving and a path of joy. One of the saddest realities of those who claim to be a follower of Christ is a lack of joy out of a refusal to turn from sin, believing that sin will bring something better and fuller than what Jesus offers. Here is what the Westminster Shorter Catechism offers as a definition:

*"Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does, with **grief and hatred of his sin, TURN from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.**"*

- **Finally, turn to the Great Physician** - And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a *physician*, but those who are *sick*. 32 I **have not come to call the righteous but sinners**

to repentance (Luke 5:31-32). When our sin gets exposed by the law producing an MRI, we don't hang our head or leave hopeless, but turn to our Great Physician who heals, forgives, and restores. But even more than that, He satisfies, fulfills, and delights. So today is a day to **repent and believe, ask for forgiveness, and our Savior who advocates and takes our place will forgive, which will lead us to joy!** (1 John 2:1-2).