

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

What Good is the Law?

Romans 7:7-13

Amen. Church you may be seated. And as you are being seated, go ahead and take your Bibles with me and turn to the Book of Romans, chapter 7. We're going to talk this morning about the three-fold purpose of the law as Paul explains it in Romans 7:7-13. But I want to start with this. For the next two weeks, I want us to explore this quote from Tim Keller. If you understand Romans 7, then you understand this. Keller writes, "When you become a Christian, you don't move from warfare to peace. You move from a battle you could not win to a new battle which you cannot lose. To understand the difference [between these] is extremely important."¹

Just before the United States was thrust into the Second World War, the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill was despondent. Churchill and England were in a tough spot in December of 1941. They were being bombed into oblivion by the German Nazis. The German U-boats were terrorizing the British Navy and their supply chain. They had lost battle after battle, and they were fearing an invasion. The war was not going well for them. But then came December 7, 1941. "A date which will live in infamy" in the famous words of FDR. After Pearl Harbor was bombed, Churchill called FDR to offer his condolences. And it was in that conversation that FDR told Churchill, "Well, we are in the same boat now."² And Churchill in his memoirs wrote later the following words. He said, "No American will think it wrong of me to proclaim that hearing the U.S. was on our side was the greatest joy to me. England would live. Britain would live. The rest of the war was simply proper application of overwhelming force. I went to bed and slept the sleep of the saved and the thankful."³

So why was this "the greatest joy" to Churchill? Why did this "date which will live in infamy" lead to a good night's sleep for him? Well, Churchill knew that because of Pearl Harbor the war had shifted for England. It wasn't a shift from warfare to peace. Quite the contrary actually. The war was about to ratchet up big time. The shift was from a battle that he could not win to now a battle that he could not lose. Similarly "When you become a Christian, you don't move from warfare to peace. You move from a battle you could not win to a new battle which you cannot lose." If you understand that statement, then you understand the Christian life.

Now that's an inspiring idea and an inspiring quotation to start this message. And I want you to be inspired. Because the rest of this message is going to be a little depressing, okay. Because Paul's going to unpack for you in these seven verses of Romans the battle that you can't win. And he's going to explain the strategic purpose of the law in helping you to see that. So, don't be depressed. Keep that quote in your mind throughout this message. "When you become a Christian, you don't move from warfare to peace. You move from a battle you could not win to a new battle which you cannot lose."

Alright. So let's dive in here. I'll give you three purposes for the law in Romans 7:7-13. You can call these the "Three Ds of the law." And here's the first. This first one is not going to surprise you at all if you've listened to me preach for the last year on the Book of Romans.

1) God uses the law to **disclose** our sin (7:7-8)

Paul says in verse 7,

⁷ What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means!

Paul talked about our death to sin at the end of Chapter 6. We are no longer slaves to sin, we are slaved to righteousness. Paul talked about our death to the law at the beginning of Chapter 7. Remember that? We

¹ Timothy J. Keller, "War Between Your Selves—Part 1," 08.17.1997, *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).

² Taken from the article by J.D. Greear, "Claim Victory to Help You in the Fight against Sin," 07.13.2019. Church Leaders: <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/355309-claiming-victory-will-help-you-in-the-fight.html>

³ Cited in Greear, "Claim Victory to Help You in the Fight Against Sin," 07.13.2019.

aren't married to the law, we are married to Christ Jesus. He's a better husband than the law. But Paul wants to be clear that the law should not be equated with sin. The law is good. Sin is not.

⁷ *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."*

Are we sinners without the law? Yes, we are. We are just ignorant to our sin. It's not that the law makes us sinful. It's that the law exposes our sinfulness. It makes our sin utterly sinful. In Paul's case, it showed him how covetous he was.

And coveting is key here. Coveting is the tenth commandment. It's the last commandment. And Tom Schreiner says in his commentary on Romans that even if you get through the first nine commandments unscathed, you won't get past the tenth commandment.⁴ **Commandment 1. Check. Commandment 2, No idols. Check. No adultery. Check. No murder. Check. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Check. "I'm good, Lord."**

Okay, well at the tenth commandment, **your house of cards comes tumbling down.** Because more than any other sin, the tenth commandment is a matter of the heart. Adultery! Murder! Honor your father and mother! Those are, for the most part, outward commands. But covetousness is inward. That's a heart matter. Honestly, they are all matters of the heart; Jesus makes that clear in **Matthew 5**. And Jesus just about says that we've broken all of them in **Matthew 5**. But the tenth commandment more than all the others is expressly a matter of the heart. **Do you desire someone else's stuff? Do you envy someone else's life? Someone else's wife? Someone else's house? Someone else's gifts or talents or health or resources? Do you envy someone else's genes that allows them to keep off weight better than you can? Uh, yeah! I've coveted that before.** What Schreiner says is that even if you can make it through the first nine commandment, which you can't by the way, you'll never make it past the tenth commandment. We all stand guilty of sin before God by the tenth commandment. And it's not just us, Paul confesses that about himself here. **This is autobiographical for him. If Paul's guilty of this, you can rest assured that we are all guilty of this.**

Paul's says,

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."

Was Paul a coveter before he read that law? Yes. He was just an ignorant coveter. Now he knows that about himself, which is good. He's on the way to winning the war against coveting.

Let's keep reading.

⁸ *But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.*

This verse is very similar to what I said last week about the law. **The sign says 70mph. What speed do we drive? 75mph! The sign says "Keep off the Grass." What do we do? We lie down on the grass and we use that sign to hang up our clothes. Augustine was told, "Don't take those pears." What does he do? He takes the pears. And he doesn't even like pears. In fact, he confesses in his book that he gave the pears to the pigs. So why did he take them? Why did he take them? Because someone told him "don't take them." Because forbidden fruit is the sweetest fruit... at first anyways.**

Doug Moo says it this way in his commentary on **Romans**: **"It was only after the Israelites had heard the commandment not to make any idols for themselves (Exod 20:4) that they had Aaron fashion a golden calf for them to worship (Exod 32). In just this way the law, abused by the sinful tendency already resident in every person, has been instrumental in stimulating all kinds of sinful tendencies."**⁵

So when Paul says, "apart from the law, sin lies dead." That doesn't mean that sin didn't exist before the law. Paul made that clear earlier (cf. **Rom 5:13-14**). The idea here is that sin was dormant. Sin was a sleeping monster. Sin was lifeless and latent in his life before the law. **Now the law has awakened a sleeping giant.**

In *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan describes it this way. There's a scene in the book where Interpreter leads Christian into a parlor. And the parlor symbolizes Christian's heart.⁶ And there is dust everywhere on the floor of this parlor. The dust is a symbol of sin. And what do you think symbolizes the

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Second Edition, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 367. See also Timothy Keller, *Romans 1-7 For You* (The Good Book Company, 2014), 165.

⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 436.

⁶ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress: From This World to That Which Is to Come*, "The Second Stage" (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995). I was reminded of this analogy by Alan F. Johnson's commentary on *Romans*, *Everyday Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 2018), 128.

law in this room? The law is a broom. And the law starts sweeping up that dust and stirring it up in the room. And the dust gets so bad that Christian can't even breathe. That's a good picture right there. Is the law bad? Is the broom bad? No. It shows us how much dust we have in our room. It's just ineffective at getting the dust out of the room. The law exposes the sin in our hearts, but it's ineffective in getting the sin out of our hearts!

Think of it this way. This illustration is going to give some of you nightmares tonight. Imagine yourself sleeping in a room full of rattlesnakes. And these snakes are sleeping and hidden throughout your room. And at some point they are going to strike you dead, but they are dormant right now. And you are able somehow to avoid getting bitten by them. Well, all of a sudden the law knocks on your door and says, "There are a bunch of rattlesnakes in your room, you idiot. Don't you see them?" And then to prove it to you, he starts poking and prodding them to wake them up. Did the Law do you a favor? Yeah, sort of. He showed me the snakes. He woke them up. But he doesn't know how to get rid of them. Here's the bad news. The law can't get those snakes out of your room, and neither can you. **What you need is a Pied Piper who can lure those rattlesnakes out of the room for you. There is such a Pied Piper, by the way. More on him later.**

Christopher Ash illustrates it this way. He says imagine "a man [sitting] in a room tied to a sleeping monster called 'sin'. He is, in a precarious sense, 'alive' while the monster dozes. But then 'the commandment' enters the room and says in a loud voice to the man that he must kill the monster 'sin'. What happens? Surprise, surprise, the monster wakes and doesn't want to be killed! If it's your life or mine, says the monster, that's an easy choice. And so the man dies, killed by his own monster, awakened by the law... The man thought the authoritative voice telling him to kill the monster 'sin' could actually kill it and enable him to live free from sin. Instead, it just served to wake up the monster who showed him who was boss."⁷ **We need more than the voice of the law to set us free from slavery to sin. We need a slayer. We need someone who can slay that monster not just expose it!**

So just to be clear, the Law is good. It's not sin. But it awakens sin inside us. Write this down as #2. God uses the law to disclose our sin. But also...

2) God uses the law to **demonstrate** our helplessness (7:9-11)

Paul says in verse 9,

⁹ I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.

Now Paul was raised in a Jewish home, so he didn't know life apart from the law. But as a kid, **the law was like wallpaper in a home.** It's everywhere and nowhere. It's so ubiquitous you don't really think about it or try to notice it. It's just there. It's like the air you breathe.

But then, in the Jewish culture, you turn 13. You have a *bar mitzvah*. *Bar* is the Aramaic word for "son." And *mitzvah* means "commandment." So a 13-year-old boy becomes a man. And he becomes not a son of God, like when a Christian gets saved. He becomes instead a "son of the commandment."⁸ You become a "son of the law." And this might seem like a good thing. **But for Paul this was an albatross around his neck.**

⁹ I was once alive apart from the law,

In other words, "Ignorance was bliss." The law was all around me as the air I breathed, but it wasn't binding on my conscience.

but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.

When it came into my life, it was like a broom that started sweeping up sin. It awakened the monster within me.

¹⁰ The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.

The Psalmist says in the OT, "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Ps 119:97). **Psalm 1:1-2** says blessed is the one whose "delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night." **Leviticus 18:5** says, "You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD." Paul even writes later in **Romans 10:5**, "For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them." **The**

⁷Christopher Ash, *Teaching Romans: Unlocking Romans 1-8 for the Bible Teacher*, ed. David Jackman and Robin Sydserff, vol. 1, Teach the Bible (Ross-shire, Scotland; London: Proclamation Trust Media; Christian Focus Publications, 2009), 255.

⁸Schreiner, *Romans*, 361-3.

problem is that the law promises something and shows us something that it can't deliver. That's the dilemma that we find ourselves in.

Let me use a literary illustration for you. The Law is like Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*. Lennie's got a heart of gold. And Lennie likes the bunnies. But Lennie doesn't know his own strength, and he keeps killing the bunnies. That's the Law. It's good, but it kills us. It awakens sin inside of us and puts us to death.

Paul says in **verse 11**.

¹¹ For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

You might say, **"There's a lot of killing going on here, Pastor Tony. This is depressing! Is there any good news here?"** Yes! This is the good news! Remember the quote I gave you earlier. **"When you become a Christian, you don't move from warfare to peace. You move from a battle you could not win to a new battle which you cannot lose." You've got to come to terms with the battle you can't win, before you can move to the battle you can't lose. You've got to reach the end of yourself before you can find a better way. You've got to lay your deadly doing down. You've got to stop looking to the law or to legalism or to being a nice person for salvation.**

I've been reading this book recently called *The Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story*.⁹ Great book, by the way. The best book on American history that I've ever read. Seriously, read that book. Quit watching the news at night and read this instead.

Well I heard the author of that book, Wilfred McClay, give an interview this last week, and McClay said that when he was a kid he went to Sunday School at United Presbyterian something or rather... some liberal denomination. And he said the message he got from his Sunday school teachers was basically this: **"Jesus was nice, and then he died. So, little boys and girls, you be nice too."** I laughed out loud when I heard that. I thought to myself, **"Do people really teach that ridiculous notion in Sunday Schools"** **"Jesus was nice, and then he died. So you be nice too, kids."** **What a crock! That's just warmed over legalism. That's just the law repackaged and repurposed for little Christian kids instead of little Jewish kids. And that is not what children's ministry should be teaching. Children's ministry should be teaching kids that there is a little monster inside of you called sin. And you've got to kill that monster. You've got to kill that monster before it destroys you.**

And you know how you kill it? Do you know how to kill it, boys and girls? You don't kill it with niceness! That is like bringing a knife to gunfight!

Do you remember that scene in Indiana Jones when the guy starts swinging his swords threateningly before Indiana Jones? And Harrison Ford just pulls out his gun and casually shoots him. That's you trying to battle sin with the law! That's you try to save yourself from sin!

"So, okay Pastor Tony." "We don't kill our sin with niceness! Got it!" "What do we kill it with? How are we saved from it?" "How do we move from the battle we can't win to the battle we can't lose?" That's a great question. I'll get there, I promise. I'm going to answer that question.

But first write this down as #3. God uses the law to disclose our sin. God uses the law to demonstrate our helplessness. And thirdly...

3) God uses the law to **destroy** our self-reliance (7:12-13)

I'm tempted at this point to tell you guys a joke to illustrate this third point. But Josh Gibson said that after my joke last week, I'm not allowed to tell jokes for a while. So I'll just give you an illustration.

Tony Evans said once that when he goes over to someone's house, and that person has a dog, he can always tell whether or not it's a Law Dog or a Grace Dog. He says, "A law dog has its tail tucked underneath. Its master intimidates it. It's afraid of its master. It is a miserable dog. But a grace dog's tail is wagging when its master comes home because there's a relationship there."¹⁰ God wants grace dogs, not law dogs. God has to destroy our self-reliance in order for us to turn to grace. God does that by using the law. God uses the law to turn us away from the law and towards grace.

Paul says this in **verse 12**.

¹² So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

⁹ Wilfred M. McClay, *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story* (Encounter Books, 2019).

¹⁰ Tony Evans' *Book of Illustrations: Stories, Quotes, and Anecdotes from More Than 30 Years of Preaching and Public Speaking* (United States: Moody Publishers, 2009).a

Is the law bad? No. Did the law deceive me and kill me? No. Look again at **verse 11**.

¹¹ For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

The commandment is one aspect of the law. The Mosaic Law in the Pentateuch has 613 commandments. None of those individual commandments or the law as a whole is evil. They don't deceive or kill us. But they awaken sin. And sin seizes the opportunity to deceive and kill us.

So back to **verse 12**.

¹² So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. ¹³ 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.

I like how the NIV renders this verse. This wording is stuck in my brain. "...it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful." God uses the law makes sin utterly sinful. God uses the law to dispossess us of the nation that "if I only try a little harder." "If I just pull myself up by own bootstraps." "If I just can get the good to outweigh the bad." No. You've got to stop thinking like that. You've got to be purged of your self-reliance for salvation. You sin has to become utterly sinful to you. It's insurmountably sinful in your heart. And that doesn't stop at salvation. That continues right on through sanctification. **R. Kent Hughes** said once, "Every year as I grow in the Lord I become aware that though I am born again and my sin is covered by Christ's blood, I am in myself thoroughly, disgustingly sinful." If that word "disgustingly" sounds too strong and too harsh too you. That's because you are very young in the LORD. Just wait. **Because the more you walk with the Lord, the more the light shines on the cracks of your heart and exposes sin inside you, you didn't even know existed. And there are there parallel things that happen as you grow as a Christian. You start to grow in holiness, in sanctification. But you also start to grow in the knowledge of how sinful in the depths of your being you really are. And you grow more humble. And you grow more thankful that God in his mercy saved you from your sin.**

You know there's this great moment in the book the *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. You guys ever read that book? You should. It's fantastic. I'll be talking more about that book next Sunday. So, read it this week. And don't watch any of the movies either. The movies are junk, and they miss some of the important aspects of the book.

You see in the book, Dr. Jekyll created this potion to release the wickedness inside of him. And by day, he was Dr. Jekyll, the mild-mannered scientist. But by night, he was his alter ego, Edward Hyde, who was the perfect embodiment of evil. And at the end of the book, when Dr. Jekyll realizes that Edward Hyde is really, really wicked, way more wicked than he ever imagined, he decides to stop taking the potion. And when he finds out that Edward Hyde has actual murdered someone, Dr. Jekyll is mortified. So he quits the potion and decides that he's going to be good. He's going to be righteous. He's going to be nice. He's going to redeem the past. He's going to be so good and so kind and express such goodwill to others that it'll make up for all the evil that Edward Hyde did.

And at first that redemption project was working. Dr. Jekyll was trying to make up for his evil. But one day he was sitting in the park. And he was enjoying himself. And then all of a sudden he started comparing himself with other men. And then he started comparing his goodwill towards others with the laziness and cruelty of other men. And here's an actual quote from the book, "And at the very moment of that vainglorious thought, a qualm came over me, a horrid nausea and the most deadly shuddering... I looked down; my clothes hung formlessly on my shrunken limbs; the hand that lay on my knee was corded and hairy. I was once more Edward Hyde." It's a terrifying moment in the book. And what's terrifying about it is that he didn't even take the potion this time! The monster was inside of him, and he couldn't conquer the monster.

You see, there's a way to be evil that awakens the monster inside of us. And there's a way to be good that awakens the monster inside of us. Paul got through the first nine of the Ten Commandments, and he thought he was good. But then he read, "thou shalt not covet." And that commandment exposed him. Dr. Jekyll thought he was doing good, but then that "goodness" led to pride and awoke the monster within him. You think you are safe from sin. You think you can outdo your sin with righteousness and the law. That doesn't save you. It awakens a sleeping monster that destroys you. **What are we going to do about that, Harvest Decatur?**

Can I borrow some wording from next week's passage? I promise I won't preach the entire passage right now, but just look with me quickly at **verse 24**. "[O] Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this

body of death?" Who is going to slay the monster within me? It's not the law! It can't be the law! The law just makes my problem worse. So who is it?

By the way, "who" is the right question! It's not "what" "will save me from this body of death"; It's "who will save me from this body of death!" Who is it? Who is the who?

Look at **verse 25**. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" **Who's the Pied Piper who chases all the rattlesnakes away? Who's the sin-slayer? Who kills the monster of sin inside me? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord who saves me from this body of sin and death.**

I want to close with this. Let me circle back to what I said at the beginning. Here's that quote again: "When you become a Christian, you don't move from warfare to peace. You move from a battle you could not win to a new battle which you cannot lose." What's the battle you can't win? The battle against sin by obeying the law. **That's like taking a knife to a gunfight.** What's the battle you can't lose? That's putting your faith in Christ and allowing him to defeat sin in your life. Christ becomes then the basis for your justification, your sanctification, and your glorification.

Does your faith in Christ lead immediately to peace? No. It's Pearl Harbor Day! The war is in midstream. You are battling right now, right now, against your flesh, against sin, and against the devil. And it's a fierce battle. It's like Nazi Germany fierce. But here's the good news. You're battling, battling, battling. I'm battling, battling, battling. We are battling together as the church of Jesus Christ. We are battling together against the enemies of darkness and the monster inside our own soul. But here's the good news in that battle. We're fighting a battle that we can't ultimately lose. Jesus Christ is on our side. **He's even better than the Americans in World War II. He will not falter. He will not fail us.**

Let me invite our worship team now to come up here and lead us in a final song. You know, when I was a kid we sang this song called "Victory in Jesus." It doesn't really translate to a modern-day worship style. That's okay. The lyrics are still good. It goes like this.

*I heard an old, old story, how a Savior came from glory
How He gave His life on Calvary to save a wretch like me
I heard about His groaning, of His precious blood's atoning
Then I repented of my sins and won the victory
Oh victory in Jesus, my Savior forever
He sought me and bought me with His redeeming blood
He loved me ere I knew Him and all my love is due Him
He plunged me to victory beneath the cleansing flood*

We don't do that song here at Harvest. But we do a similar song. And it's just as good. It goes like this:
*To all who are the tired and the heavy laden, Hope has come
To all who feel the weight of a broken spirit, Hope has come
Lift up your eyes, lift up your head, The power of our sin is dead
He has won, Death is swallowed up in victory
Through the Son, The grave has lost its sting and its grip over me
'Cause He has won*

That's really, really good, Harvest Decatur. Let's stand and sing that together!