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Sin and the Law

Romans 7.7-12

Series: The Pure Gospel

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The Village Church

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I. Introduction

- A. Lee Trevino, the great golfer back in the day was once struck by lightening when he was on the golf course
 - 1. Trevino, was, of course, great at playing golf – that was one of his greatest strength
 - a. But he also had a great sense of humor
 - b. That was also once of his greatest strengths
 - c. Arguably as strong as his golf game
- B. Shortly after he was struck by lightening he was invited on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson
 - 1. Carson asked him about that incident
 - a. He asked him, first, what he learned through that experience
 - 2. Trevino said, “If the Almighty wants to play through, you let Him go!”
 - 3. Then Caron asked him what he would do the next time he was on the golf course and a thunderstorm came up quickly
 - 4. Trevino said, “I would take out my 1 iron and hold it in the air.”
 - 5. Carson was visibly stunned
 - a. His face showed astonishment
 - b. And he exclaimed, “Why on earth would you do that?”
 - 6. Trevino said, “Because not even God can hit a 1 iron.”
- C. Which brings us into the deep theological subject – which I presume Trevino hadn’t wanted to explore
 - 1. And that is, is there anything that God can’t do?
- D. Perhaps your first impulse is to say, “Of course not – there is nothing God can’t do!”
 - 1. But often our first impulses are wrong
 - 2. And that impulse would be wrong as well
- E. There are many things God can’t do
 - 1. And they all fit into the general category of, “God can’t do anything that is not consistent with His nature and character”
- F. Theologians love to play the chicken-and-egg game
 - 1. You know – which came first, the chicken or the egg?
 - 2. They play it with God – after all they are theologians
 - a. And here’s how the game goes
 - 3. Is God good because He does good things?

- a. Or does God do good things because He is good?
- G. Of course the answer is the latter
 - 1. God does good things because He is good
 - 2. He does righteous things because He is righteous
 - 3. He does merciful things because He is merciful
 - 4. And so forth...
- H. And that means that God can't do many things
 - 1. He can't do that which is evil
 - 2. He can't do that which is wicked
 - 3. He can't do that which is sinful
 - 4. So there are many things God can't do
- I. Now, you might object
 - 1. You might say, God does evil things; God does wicked things; God does sinful things!
 - 2. But in the final analysis, when you explore the issues closely, you discover that God does things that you and I don't like
 - a. Or even more likely, that you and I don't understand
 - 3. Or you find that God allows wicked, evil people to act wickedly and sinfully
 - a. How else would you expect evil people to act?
 - b. And He does so for His good purposes
 - c. Purposes which display His glory and provide the for welfare of His own people
 - 4. **Romans 9:22–24** (ESV) —
 - a. 22 What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power,
 - b. has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,
 - c. 23 in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—
 - d. 24 even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?
 - 5. Now that's a verse that many people don't like
 - a. In fact, unbelievers hate it!
 - b. But it reveals that God displays the glory of His grace
 - c. Which bursts forth in bright luster against the black backdrop of a sinful humanity
 - d. And so, it turns out – God acts in ways that display His greatness, His glory, His sovereignty, and His mercy and grace
 - e. In other words – God acts according to His nature and character; not against His nature and character
 - 6. **Romans 8:35–39** (ESV) —
 - a. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
 - b. Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

- c. 36 As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
 - d. we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”
 - e. 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
 - f. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,
 - g. 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- 7. All of those things take place – God allows them; even ordains them
 - a. Tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword
 - b. But in spite of all those things, through faith in Jesus Christ, the rich display of the glory of the grace of God is manifested
 - c. And we all who believe testify to His greatness and His goodness even as we trust Him through them all
- J. So no, God can’t do everything; He can’t do anything
 - 1. He can’t do anything contrary to His nature and character

II. The Weakness of the Law

- A. In a like manner, God’s Law – which emanates from His nature and character – can’t do everything
 - 1. And that’s because God hasn’t designed it to do everything
 - 2. He has designed His Law to have certain strengths
 - a. Certain things that nothing else can accomplish nearly so well
 - 3. At the same time, His Law is weak in other areas
 - a. And there are certain things that the Law of God cannot accomplish
 - b. Because it was never meant to accomplish; it wasn’t designed to accomplish it
- B. I’ve been watching the U.S. Swimming Olympic Trials this past week
 - 1. I’m fascinated by the sport having done some competitive swimming in years gone by
 - 2. Now there are four main competitive strokes
 - a. And a variety of distances in those strokes
 - 3. Strokes – freestyle, butterfly, backstroke and breaststroke
 - a. And there are competitive distances ranging from 50 meters up to 1,500 meters
 - 4. And you very quickly discover that even the best swimmers in the world are stronger in some events than in others
 - a. Generally, the best freestyle swimmers are not the best backstrokers
 - b. The best butterflyers are not the best breaststrokers

5. One of the greatest female swimmers (yes, the Olympics still have the good sense to not allow male swimmers to swim in female events) – one of the greatest, most legendary female swimmers is Katy Ledecky
 - a. She has qualified for her fourth Olympics
 - b. She swims freestyle events
 - c. And her best distances are the longer ones
 - d. She is unbeatable in the 1,500 meters and in the 800 meters
 - e. There are a few swimmers who approach her times in the 400 meters
 - f. And some have beaten her in the 200
 - g. But there are lots of women who can beat her in the 100 and in the 50
 - h. So she doesn't swim those
 - i. And you'll never catch her in a race swimming the butterfly or the breaststroke, or the backstroke
 - j. Because she's not strong in those
 - k. She's strong in the longer freestyle events
- C. Well, there are some things that the Law of God can do – and was designed to do
 1. And some things that the Law of God cannot do
 - a. Because it wasn't designed to do them
- D. And if you've been paying attention to the series on The Pure Gospel, which is our study of the book of Romans, you'll know what the Law's weaknesses are
 1. Justification is a weakness of the Law of God
 - a. Justification – the legal or forensic term for when God, who is judge of all the earth, declares someone not guilty
 2. On what basis does, or more properly can, God declare someone not guilty?
 - a. Well, since “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (**Romans 3.23**)
 - b. And since all are breakers of the Law of God
 - c. No one can stand before the judgment seat of God and claim that you have fulfilled the Law of God
 - d. And no one can pretend that we have done enough good deeds to balance the selfish, evil things we have done in violation of the Law of God
 - e. Remember – the first commandment is “You shall have no other gods before me” (**Exodus 20.3**)
 - f. And that, as it turns out, is our greatest strength!
 - g. We are great at putting other things in place of God; of valuing other things, other people, other relationships, other stuff ahead of God
 - h. So we can't be declared righteous before God by claiming any sort of Law-obedience
 3. **Romans 3:20** (ESV) — 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight...

4. How, then, are we able to be declared righteous?
 - a. Well, it is through the righteousness of another
 - b. Through Jesus Christ – who alone has obeyed the Law of God fully
 - c. And God has determined that through faith in His Son that we might be declared righteous through the righteousness of Christ
5. **Romans 3:23–25** (ESV) —
 - a. 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
 - b. 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
 - c. 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith....
6. And even this was designed to display God’s glory – His nature and character!
7. **Romans 3:25–26** (ESV) —
 - a. 25 ... This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.
 - b. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.
8. So God’s righteousness is on display, and His forbearance (or mercy and compassion), and His justice
 - a. All dimensions of the glory
9. So the Law is weak in justification
 - a. And God uses His Son’s work of redemption to justify us
 - b. He does not use His Law
- E. In addition, the Law is weak in sanctification
 1. Even if we are declared righteous, we cannot be made holy by obeying the Law of God
 2. As Isaiah declares, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.” (**Isaiah 64.6**)
- F. That’s what Chapter 6 in Romans has been about
 1. **Romans 6:2** (ESV) —
 - a. 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?
 2. **Romans 6:5–8** (ESV) —
 - a. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.
 - b. 6 We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.
 - c. 7 For one who has died has been set free from sin.
 - d. 8 Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.
 3. So, you see, we can only be sanctified by Christ – by our union with Him
 - a. That’s the only way we can grow in likeness to the Christ, in likeness to the holiness of God
 4. Seeking to obey the Law in the power of the flesh is impossible

- a. The Law is weak in this way
- G. So the Law is weak
 - 1. Weak in justification
 - a. We cannot be declared “not guilty” or righteous by obeying the Law
 - 2. Weak in sanctification
 - a. We cannot grow in holiness through acting in our flesh to try and fulfill the holiness of God

H. But that doesn’t mean that the Law doesn’t have its strengths

I. **Romans 7:7–12** (ESV) —

- 1. 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.”
- 2. 8 But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.
- 3. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.
- 4. 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.
- 5. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.
- 6. 12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

III. **The Law’s Great Strength**

A. **The Revelation of Sin**

- 1. **Romans 7:7** (ESV) —
 - a. 7 What then shall we say? That the law is sin?
 - b. By no means!
 - c. Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.
 - d. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”
- 2. This is actually not a new concept; we’ve already encountered it in our study of Romans
- 3. **Romans 3:20** (ESV) —
 - a. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight,
 - b. since through the law comes knowledge of sin.
- 4. The Law of God reveals sin
 - a. The Law shows us to be sinners in the sight of God by virtue of our transgression of the Law of God
- 5. Now Romans has already declared that we are sinners
 - a. And has done so in no uncertain terms
 - b. Remember Romans 3.10ff
- 6. **Romans 3:10–12** (ESV) —
 - a. 10 as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one;

- b. 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God.
 - c. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”
- 7. That is the moral standing of every single person apart from the grace of God!
 - a. But it is a startling declaration that falls on deaf ears!
 - b. The vast majority of people don’t consider themselves to be included in these categories!
- 8. Oh, it’s easy to get people to agree that they aren’t perfect
 - a. Or even that they do some things wrong according to some kind of moral standards
 - b. Violating legal codes of conduct according to the laws of the state
 - c. Or violating standards of fairness or equity in relationships and enterprise
- 9. But sinners?
 - a. That’s a bridge too far for many people
- 10. But the only way people understand they are sinners is when it can be shown that they have violated God’s Law
 - a. Because His Law reflects His nature and character
- 11. And that’s what Paul is saying here
 - a. It was only when he came face to face with the Law of God that he knew sin; that he knew he was a sinner
- 12. He uses the last of the Ten Commandments – Thou shall not covet – as the example
 - a. He would not have known what it is to covet if the Law had not said, “You shall not covet”
- 13. Paul is here looking back to his days before his conversion
 - a. And we know from Philippians 3 what he thought of himself in those days
 - b. Those days in which he was rounding up Christians, throwing them into prison, and even killing some
 - c. What did he think of himself?
 - d. **Philippians 3:6** (ESV) — 6 ... as to righteousness ... blameless.
- 14. But the Law revealed the truth of who he really was in those days
- 15. What do you think of yourself?
 - a. Do you realize that you are a sinner before the All-righteous God?
- 16. Leon Morris: People without God’s law do not see wrongdoing as it really is.... It takes the law to show wrongdoing to be sin.
- 17. So hear the Law of God
 - a. And know that before God, and apart from His grace in Jesus Christ, you stand condemned by the Law
 - b. You are a sinner in need of a Savior
- 18. And you know that because of the Law!
 - a. The Law reveals sin

B. **The Provocation of Sin**

1. Not only is the Law good at revealing sin, it is good at provoking sin
2. Now that may seem that that's not a good thing
 - a. That the Law would provoke sin
 - b. But listen to the text:
3. **Romans 7:8-9** (ESV) —
 - a. 8 But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.
 - b. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.
 - c. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.
4. Essentially, it is good that the Law of God provokes sin
 - a. Because it not only reveals us to be sinners
 - b. It puts a magnifying glass on it and shows us who we really are!
 - c. Because now we see sin in all it's hateful rebellion against the Author of life
5. Now you know this to be true intuitively
 - a. You know that if someone tells you not to do something, you immediately want to do it!
 - b. And you probably will do it
 - c. And if you've been a parent – you know exactly how that works
6. That's what you know from your own experience
 - a. But there is an obvious biblical example as well
7. In Genesis – when Adam and Eve are placed in the garden, they are given a law
 - a. The first law, as a matter of fact
 - b. God told them they could eat of any tree in the garden – and there was an abundance of trees to choose from
 - c. But they couldn't eat of one tree – the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil
 - d. But now they had something to rebel against!
 - e. We can't really understand how the first impulse to sin came about
 - f. But it clearly did
 - g. And with a little help from their “friend” the serpent – there they were – violating the command of God
 - h. Revealing sin to be sin
 - i. And them to be sinners
8. Another example – Augustine
 - a. In an example which he describes in his Confessions
9. Boice summarizes:
 - a. Saint Augustine in his Confessions tells of a time in his youth when he and a band of his friends went into a neighbor's field at night to steal pears. They shook the neighbor's pear tree, knocking down a large quantity of pears, then carried them off, eating a few but throwing most of them to some pigs. Why did Augustine steal

the pears? With characteristic thoroughness, this great medieval theologian analyzes the question for many pages.

- b. Was it the beauty of the pears? They were beautiful, it is true, since they were part of God's creation. But that was not why he stole them. He had others of even greater beauty at home.
 - c. Was he hungry and needed something to eat? That was not it.
 - d. Did he want to be approved by the others? That was part of the reason, he says. But it does not explain why the others, like himself, should have given approval for such a wrong act. Why should stealing be praiseworthy?
 - e. At last Augustine gets to the real reason, saying, "I only picked them so that I might steal.... I loved nothing in it except the thieving." It is a way of saying that the desire to steal was awakened by the prohibition.
10. So the Law of God is good because it provokes sin in us
- a. It's like the pathologist that places a specimen in a Petry dish in a culture of nutrients
 - b. And if a bacteria is present it will grow; the germ will be manifested
 - c. And the report to the doctor will give diagnosis
 - d. And the diagnosis will yield a treatment
11. And that's what the Law of God does
- a. It provokes sin so we can have the definitive diagnosis

C. **The Slaying of Sin**

- 1. Finally, the Law of God kills us
 - a. It's what I'm calling "The Slaying of Sin"
- 2. Now that doesn't seem too good either, does it?
 - a. Oh, but that may be the best things the Law does
- 3. **Romans 7:9–11** (ESV) —
 - a. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.
 - b. 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.
 - c. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.
- 4. What Paul means by this is that the Law brought him to the end of himself
 - a. He had no life in himself by which he could counter the effects of sin
- 5. Again, Paul is here referring to his time before his conversion
 - a. He had never died to himself; never came to the end of himself
 - b. He believed he was without fault with respect to what he elsewhere calls "legalistic righteousness"
 - c. He actually thought he was in good standing before God
- 6. Leon Morris: He was alive in the sense that he had never been put to death as a result of a confrontation with the Law of God.

7. But once Paul was confronted with the Law of God – coveting in particular – he knew he was a dead man!
 - a. He knew he could no longer resort to his own self-righteousness
 - b. His condition was now hopeless
8. Now you might say, “That’s bad! It’s bad to be hopeless!”
 - a. No! We will never cast ourselves on the mercy of Christ if we somehow pretend that we have some inherent goodness in ourselves
 - b. That we have some vestigial organ of righteousness in the recesses of our souls
9. It’s only when we come to the complete end of ourselves that we find the surpassing value of Jesus Christ
10. Boice: As long as Paul thought he was doing all right, he was on his way to perdition. It was only when he learned he was lost that he was ready to hear God’s words about the Savior.
11. It’s good that the Law reveals sin
 - a. It’s good that the Law provokes sin, showing us to be who we really are, and diagnosing our condition accurately
 - b. And it’s good that the Law kills us – brings us to the end of ourselves
12. **Romans 7:12** (ESV) —
 - a. 12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

IV. **Preach the Law!**

- A. So, dear friends – that’s why when we preach the gospel, we preach the Law!
 1. In fact, we must preach the Law
 - a. For we cannot understand the gospel unless the Law of God has its effect
 2. And its one of the weaknesses of the contemporary church – especially in America and in the west – that we avoid preaching the Law
 3. There are any number of reasons why we avoid preaching the Law
 - a. We value relationships and don’t want to offend
 - b. We fear being called bigots for calling sin sin
 - c. We hate conflict and don’t want to swim upstream against the currents of our culture
 4. But ultimately, we must preach the Law
- B. It is sin to...
 1. Kill children in the womb, presumably the most secure place that child will ever know
 2. Call men women and women me
 3. Lie about our circumstances and events, and especially about others
 4. Call evil good and good evil
 5. Support murderers and terrorists

6. To do any number of things which the Word of God, the Law of God, declares to be sin
- C. It is especially sin to lie about ourselves
1. About our true condition
 - a. Which only comes to light when we have a personal confrontation with the Law of God
- D. I've used a couple of illustrations about Dr. John Gerstner, the late Professor of Church History at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
1. Here's another
 2. When he was doing pulpit supply in western Pennsylvania, he went to a church
 - a. And he was preaching on Romans
 - b. He was expounding the Law of God
 - c. And in doing so he was stripping away the defenses and the deflections of human character
 - d. In his preaching the veil was lifted on human sinfulness
 3. After the service he did what we preachers frequently do – go to the back of the church and greet people as they leave
 4. A woman approached him
 - a. She held up her hand with her thumb and index finger about a half-inch apart, like this...
 - b. She said, "Dr. Gerstner, you make me feel this big."
 5. He replied, "But, Madam, that's too big. That's much too big. Don't you know that that much self-righteousness will take you to hell?"
- E. **Romans 7:12 (ESV) — 12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.**
1. Let the Law of God do what it does well
 2. Let the Law of God
 - a. Reveal sin
 - b. Provoke sin so that our condition might be made clear
 - c. Slay us – bring us to the absolute end of ourselves
 3. So that we may cast ourselves on the mercy of the Savior