“THE LAW IS HOLY AND RIGHTEOUS AND GOOD”
(To Know the Sin in Me, Part 1)

Romans 7:7–13
Key Verse: 7:7a

> “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.”

Do you like looking in a mirror? Some people will stand in front of a mirror only if someone else pushes them. They don’t want to face what they really look like. Others, working on that perfect look, have to be pushed to step away from the mirror. Today we almost can’t imagine life without mirrors, but in the 19th century, people used to drape sheets over the mirrors in their houses because of a superstition about death. Throughout the ages people have found looking in a mirror to be both frightening and depressing. In today’s passage Apostle Paul tells us God’s law is like a mirror. Or better yet, it’s like a chemical catalyst. As we expose ourselves to God’s law, at first we might actually get worse. Who on earth would want to go through that? How can we engage in this self-realization in a healthy way? And why should we? May God speak to us through his word today.

To begin, let’s look at the context. To understand why Paul defends the law here, we need to remember where we’ve been in Romans. Paul has spent the first five chapters proving that we are made right with God by grace alone, apart from “works of the law" (3:20,24,28; 5:2,15,17). But then, in chapters 6 through 8, he explains sanctification—how we are actually changed. While chapter 8 will show us how the Holy Spirit makes holiness possible, chapter 6 insists on our active obedience, reminding us that grace is not a license for sin (6:1,15). Last week, we learned that we are “married” to Christ, who is so gracious to us, and thus we are released from our old legalisms so we can bear fruit for God (7:1–6).

So why does Paul suddenly start defending the law in verse 7? It sounds like we don’t need it anymore. But, not so fast! Yes, it’s the Holy Spirit who convicts us (John 16:8), but for our sanctification to go deep, we need a growing awareness of our sin—and without God’s law, we’re clueless. That’s why, both today and next Sunday, under our subtitle “To Know the Sin in Me,” we are slowing down to study Romans 7:7–25. In verses 7–13, we see how the law acts as a mirror, showing us who we really are. In verses 14–25, Paul shares his own raw struggle with the law. So let’s get into verses 7–13.

First, the law of God diagnoses sin (7a). Read verse 7a. Notice how Paul exclaims “By no means!” both here and in verse 13—which is how he always responds in Romans when tackling a misunderstanding. God’s law itself is not

sin. Paul adds: “Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.” In this passage of only seven verses Paul repeats the word “sin” nine times. He’s not giving us a list of misbehavior, but addressing an entity within us.

Earlier, Paul described sin in this same way. In 3:20 he stated: “...through the law comes knowledge of sin.” In 5:13 he wrote: “...but sin is not counted when there is no law.” Here in 7:9b he explains: “For apart from the law sin lies dead.” Sin is not actually dead; it’s just latent. God’s law doesn’t create sin; it diagnoses and exposes sin’s hidden reality within us.

Why do we need to know this reality? Isn’t it better to focus on knowing God’s grace to us in Jesus? That may seem true. But to really know, to truly experience his grace, we have to know the depth of our sin. Only as we see the stark reality of sin within us can we begin the struggle for sanctification. In our times, people live in sin so freely, our awareness of sin has become almost non-existent. We all need the help of God’s law to recognize the reality of our sin.

To illustrate, Paul turns to his own experience. Let’s read verse 7b. The word “covet” is a bit dated; we usually say “envy.” But the original Greek word is stronger: it literally means “illegal passion”—longing for something that God in his goodness doesn’t allow us to have. At first, coveting has to do with others’ property. It extends to their relationships, and to their lifestyle. None of it is ours. Among the Ten Commandments, “You shall not covet” is the only one that deals not with outward action but with inner desire, what we want. Without God’s law, we are left to our innate desires, with no godly boundaries. We need God’s law to unmask our unruly passions for what they are: a deep-rooted self-centeredness.

We tend to think of coveting as just wanting our neighbor’s shiny new car. But it sneaks into our daily lives more subtly. Coveting is scrolling through social media, seeing someone else’s life, career or family, and feeling a quiet, gnawing resentment, as if God shortchanged us and gave someone else what should have been ours. Without God’s law, we would call that “ambition” or “comparison.” And we have no sense it’s even a spiritual problem.

Second, the law is a catalyst for sin (8–11). In verse 7 Paul repeated the word “known” twice, emphasizing that he came to know sin not through abstract theory, but through personal, painful experience (cf. 3:20). Now, note how in verses 8, 11 and 13 Paul treats “sin” not as a passive concept, but as a noun acting as the active subject of the sentence. He is personifying sin as a hostile power. Look at verse 8a: “...sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment” (cf. 7:11). The word “opportunity” literally meant a “base of operations,” like a strategic staging ground for an army attack. When sin within us encounters God’s holy law, it uses that law as a stronghold to attack us.

Paul repeats the word “commandment” six times here, pointing to the Ten Commandments as a whole. They tell us to love God and others, but we don’t realize how little love we actually have until we encounter these commandments. God’s commandment promises life (10; cf. Lev. 18:5; Deut. 8:1; 30:15–20), but by provoking us to disobey, sin makes the commandment produce death. As Paul explains in verse 8b, “For apart from the law sin lies dead.” He doesn’t mean sin didn’t exist; he’s describing sin as an active power lying dormant within us—like a venomous rattlesnake coiled up fast asleep under a desert rock. It’s alive, but because it’s motionless, you walk right past it feeling safe. Before God’s law penetrates our hearts, we feel morally secure. But when the commandment shines on us, our sin comes alive. And like Paul, we “die”— meaning we start to die to all our self-righteousness and self-confidence.

Paul’s personal example shows us that sin is essentially rebellious. When God’s law commands us not to do something, initially we might be indifferent, but after hearing not to, we suddenly want to do it. In other words, the law doesn’t kill our desire; it inflames it. Before I started kindergarten, my mom warned me not to put my hand on the glowing electric coil burner on our kitchen stove. I wasn’t thinking about doing it, but the moment she told me not to, I immediately put my hand there. Think of sin like a chemical catalyst. In chemistry, a catalyst is introduced to an element to trigger a reaction. Without it, everything might stay calm and dormant. But the moment it’s added, things start fizzing, smoking, and reacting violently. That’s what God’s law does: it introduces a holy boundary, and suddenly, our hidden sin begins to bubble and react. Coupled with this, sin is deeply deceptive. It deceives us into thinking what we want is actually good for us. It leads us to believe that acting on our desires will set us free, and that we can manage them on our own. In fact, as we give in to it, sin enslaves us. Paul will say more about this in the next section, but here he puts it simply: sin deceives and kills us, through the commandment (11).

Third, “sinful beyond measure” (12–13). Let’s read verse 12. In Romans, Paul has described the law in ways that seem negative: it exposes hypocrisy, brings wrath, and increases the trespass (chapter 2; 4:15; 5:20). Paul declared we are “no longer under law but under grace” (6:14). But now he makes a bold statement. He calls the law “holy,” and adds that it is “righteous” and “good.” Why? Is he trying to get Gentile Christians to accept all the Jewish laws? No. He’s telling us that the law is a precious gift. The law given through Moses was the first installment of God’s grace to us (John 1:17). The law is still an instrument of God’s grace, to show us who we really are.

Let’s read verse 13. This verse lays the blame for the arousal of sin not on the law, but on sin itself. Sin is so toxic, it weaponizes the holy, righteous and

good law of God to bring death to us. And God allows it, so that sin's true ugliness is exposed. The word for "beyond measure" is literally "hyperbole"—in today's language, "to the max." It's telling us that sin is like an extreme monster living inside us that we don't even know is there. Once ignited, it can take over anyone. The point is not to scare us; it's to show that sanctification requires an accurate diagnosis. We can't experience the changing power of the gospel if we ignore our sin or treat it as a minor flaw rather than a deadly reality.

Fourth, driven to Jesus. A shallow view of sin leaves us with a shallow love for Christ. But the law trains us as a guardian does a young child (Gal. 3:24). How? It trains us to stop relying on ourselves for righteousness, and instead come to Jesus. In one of his other letters Paul humbly described his own former life. He'd been a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent (1:13). In his self-righteousness he thought he was the best. But in the light of Christ, he finally could see his true, scary self. He wrote: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tim. 1:15). Only when he saw how wicked he was could he experience the saving grace in Christ Jesus. It's similar to the saying: "If I don't think I'm very sick, why go to the doctor?"

How can we apply this today? Many of us treat the Bible like a selective menu—we read the parts we like and skip the parts that make us uncomfortable. We just want the Bible to make us feel good. But reading all of God's holy, righteous, and good law is not optional. And letting God's law expose the sin within us is not optional; it's essential if we want our sanctification to go deep enough to make a difference. Yet we need to remember: the act of Bible reading itself doesn't save us. Jesus rebuked the religious experts of his day, saying, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39–40). Every time we open the Word, we aren't just looking for rules; we are looking for Jesus. If we miss coming to our living, Risen Lord, we miss the whole point of the Bible. The more we let the Word act as a mirror to show us our sin, the more we run to Jesus for forgiveness and healing—and in that relentless pursuit of Him, we are truly saved and sanctified.

So, are you avoiding the mirror? Are you ready to see the sin within? Are you ready to read all the Bible and be led to a broken and contrite heart, to truly come to Jesus personally? Let's read verse 7a again. May God help us treasure his word as the only thing that can expose us for who we are, and bring us to our Lord Jesus for his sanctifying grace.