

The Five-Fold Function of Law

The War Within -- Part I
Romans 7:7-13

Introduction

In Romans, chapter 7, the apostle Paul has described the believer as dead to the law and alive to the Spirit.

In verses 1 through 4, he described the law as our first husband, domineering and demanding in his rules that we could never keep. In verse 5, he revealed that the law aroused our sinful passion, bringing about fruit unto death.

How is it that the law can actually make you want to sin?

What is it about the sign at Yellowstone National Park that reads, “Don’t feed the bears,” that seems to incite tourists to do what? To feed the bears. And young bears die by the road every winter, waiting for the tourists they have come to depend upon for food.

What is it about the sign, “Stay off the grass,” that makes you want to walk on it?

What is it about speed limit signs that say “Speed Limit 35” that make you immediately go 40 miles per hour?

Why is it that in the library, you get the greatest urge to talk?

The law had spoken! It said, “Don’t . . . you can’t . . . off limits.”

All a human being needs to know is that something is off limits and he will want to have it; to keep it; to experience it.

So, the reader of Paul’s letter, having been informed that the law produces fruit unto death and that it arouses the flesh to sin, might have concluded that the law itself was sinful.

Furthermore, in chapters 3 through 5, Paul taught that the law could not save anyone. In chapter 6, he explained why the law, even God’s law, could not sanctify anyone.

The reader might have concluded that the law of God was useless. And, worse than that, they might have decided that the law collaborated with sin and thus, it was sinful as well.

The Five-Fold Function of God’s Law

What is the purpose then, of God’s law? Let me give Paul’s answer in Romans, chapter 7, as he explains the five-fold function of God’s law.

The law of God defines sin

1. Number one, the law of God defines sin. Look at verses 7 and 8.

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, “You shall not covet.”. But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead.

In other words, the law does not cause sin, it identifies sin.

The law also reveals the desire of human nature to sin more. And sin takes every opportunity, wherever the law speaks, to tempt us to violate it.

The law, “You shall not covet,” does not create covetousness or remove it – it calls attention to the fact that we are doing it. In fact, it reveals that we are covetous people, constantly involved in wanting something that does not belong to us.

The law speaks and we realize that we are sinful.

Did you notice that Paul chooses this particular command to illustrate his point? Of all the Ten Commandments, this one, perhaps more than any other, reveals the inward battle of the flesh. You could translate the word “covet,” as “lust.”

There is something about forbidden fruit that is so desirable. We begin to covet, to lust after, to desire things that are forbidden, even at an early age.

If you tell your three year old child, “Don’t touch that vase,” he begins to salivate and hyperventilate; his eyes cannot leave the vase; his fingers stretch toward the vase as if it is the most valuable object on earth.

I watched a television show some time ago, where young children, one at a time, were put in a room with toys and a jar of cookies. They were told not to touch the cookies until the adult returned in just a minute or two. The camera recorded the scene and oh, the agony in those kids. Some of them walked over and just stared at the cookies. Some actually talked to themselves, saying, “Don’t eat the cookies, don’t eat the cookies. . .” One kid stood in the corner and banged his head against the wall. Another kid began to sing to take his mind off the temptation. What happened to the toys? They were ignored . . . because there was something else in the room that they were told they could not have.

What was it about that one tree, in the midst of so many other fruit bearing trees, that Eve so desperately wanted a taste of it that she risked everything for it?

The law commanding, “You can’t have that one thing,” was not the problem. The sin nature that covets freedom, power, and the pursuit of happiness over holiness must have its own way.

Why did Achan covet that Babylonian garment that he could never wear in public and those silver coins that he could never spend in public? What good would those things ever do him in that hole he dug in the ground, as recorded in Joshua, chapter 7, verse 21?

Why would Ahab want the vineyard of a simple man, when he owned acres of vineyards already, as we are told in I Kings, chapter 21?

Why would Ananias and Sapphira so desperately want prestige that they would lie to their congregation about their financial gift and soon lie dead in their graves, according to Acts, chapter 5?

Why would Demas leave the faith after things of the world, as Paul wrote in II Timothy, chapter 4, verse 9?

Because the law had spoken, “Don’t covet something that doesn’t belong to you!”

The law cannot be blamed . . . anymore than the sign, “no swimming . . . sharks” can be blamed when you are eaten by a shark. Law merely defines the danger – sin takes it from there.

The law of God destroys self-righteousness

2. Number two, not only does the law of God define sin, the law of God destroys self-righteousness.

Paul goes on in verses 9 and 10 to write,

I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me;

Paul is giving his personal testimony, “There was a time when I felt secure. I was a Pharisee among Pharisees; circumcised on the eighth day; a fastidious keeper of the law.”

Paul even began to pursue these Christians who were following someone other than Moses and the prophets; who were following this newly executed criminal named Jesus.

Paul says,

. . . but [then] the commandment came, . . . and I died.

There are a dozen opinions about Paul’s reference to chronology in this testimony, “. . . but when the commandment came . . .”.

I believe it to be a reference to that moment when the Law-giver appeared in the sky over that road to Damascus. At that moment, the brilliance knocked Paul off his horse and he heard that voice saying, as recorded in Acts, chapter 9, verse 4,

. . . Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?

In that instant, Paul’s self-confidence was destroyed; his self-righteousness was destroyed; all his religious accomplishments would be considered rubbish from this point forward (Philippians 3:7-8).

He had not been upholding the honor of God; he had actually been violating the honor and glory of God's Son!

At that moment, Paul died to his own religion of works and placed his faith in the crucified One, for he asked, "Lord, what would you have me to do."

What had the law done for Paul? Destroyed his self-righteousness.

Paul goes on to give a third function of the law.

The law of God declares the deception of sin

3. Number three, the law of God declares the deception of sin.

Look at verse 11 of Romans, chapter 7.

for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

Have you ever been deceived?

The verb in this verse that is translated "deceived," is intensive. It could be rendered, "to be deceived completely; to be deceived perfectly".

Sin deceives like nothing and no one can. It perfectly deceives the unbeliever.

I cannot begin to recount over my years as a pastor, the number of times I have encountered an unbeliever who is totally deceived by their sin. And believers even, who have begun to follow the deceptive lure of sin.

How does sin deceive?

How does sin deceive? Let me give five ways.

Sin deceives regarding satisfaction

- Sin deceives regarding satisfaction.

Sin says, "I'll satisfy that desire."

At first, sin seems to satisfy the desire, but then, the desire comes back even stronger. And sin says, "I'll satisfy that too."

Sin seems to satisfy again, but for a shorter period of time than before. Then, the desire for more comes again and again!

Sin does not satisfy, it inflames!

Sin deceives regarding safety

- Sin deceives regarding safety.

The sinner thinks, "It won't hurt anybody!"

This is like the words to Eve, in Genesis, chapter 3, verse 4,

... You surely will not die!

Ladies and gentlemen, sin is never safe.

Gary Richmond once worked in the Los Angeles Zoo. As a committed believer, he often saw things that happened at the zoo with a biblical perspective. He told the story, in one of his books, of a young zookeeper named Julie.

The zoo had purchased a baby raccoon and it was among Julie's duties to care for him. Playful, cuddly, puppy like in its antics, it soon won her heart – and everyone else's in that division. Julie could often be seen doing her duties with her cute little raccoon perched on her shoulder. She even named him Bandit.

However, Gary's experience caused him to worry about Julie. He told her that raccoons go through a glandular change at about twenty-four months of age. After that, they will often, unexplainably, viciously attack their owners. And a thirty-pound raccoon can do the same kind of damage as a large dog.

Over and over again, Gary warned his young friend about her growing pet. She would always listen politely as he explained the coming danger. Richmond wrote, "I will never forget her answer; it was always the same, 'It will be different for me . . . , and she would smile as she added, 'Bandit wouldn't hurt me. He just wouldn't.'"

Then Richmond wrote, "Three months after my last warning, Julie underwent plastic surgery for severe facial lacerations sustained when her adult raccoon attacked her for no apparent reason. Bandit was released into the wild."

If you warn someone of sin, they will say, "It will be different for me."

We are told in Galatians, chapter 6, verse 7,

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.

The law has spoken for your own safety. If you ignore God's word, you will, in the end, pay dearly.

Sin deceives regarding secrecy

- Sin deceives regarding satisfaction and safety, and furthermore, regarding secrecy.

You might think, "No one will know but you! No one sees but you. No one saw what you did on

that test . . . No one knows the way you filled out your expense report . . . No one saw you."

Hundreds of thousands of men in the last five years, have entered the world of internet pornography. They are deceived by one single lie – no one will ever know.

One woman, who hosts a pornography site, was interviewed some time ago. I read that interview in the newspaper. She made the statement that around 600,000 men from all around the world have visited her site. And, she believed most of them had never once purchased anything like that in public.

Sin deceives. It says that everything you do in private is private; that it will never affect you in public. That is a lie! And all the while, sin makes you become a person you never wanted to be.

Jesus said, as recorded in Mark, chapter 4, verse 22,

For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it would come to light.

You can be sure – your sin will find you out!

Sin deceives regarding shame

- Sin deceives regarding shame.

Sin says that what you did or said or thought or planned is not sin after all. You have no reason to be ashamed – wanting something is really needing something and you should never deprive yourself of something you need. So, whatever you crave or want, no matter how ungodly, there is no shame in that!

Do you think people think like that? Has sin been able to deceive people into believing that something which God's word says is wrong is actually right?

Do you follow the news?

Twelve years ago, the Episcopal church set a policy that sexual relations was appropriate only within heterosexual marriage. They have just made history as the first mainline Protestant denomination to appoint an openly homosexual bishop. I watched some of the delegates speak at that conference – and will never forget one little woman saying, "But the Bible just says it's wrong." She was viewed as ridiculously out of touch.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voted twenty-four months ago to launch a committee to re-examine its policy against same-sex activity.ⁱ

Now do not misunderstand me. I am not picking on the Episcopalians or the Lutherans. In fact, we have a Baptist church in this county with a lesbian on the pastoral staff.

Frankly, it does not really surprise me to see the world slip further and further down in the progression of Romans, chapter 1 – from the practice of sin to the applause and approval of sin. What keeps me up at night are people who, in the name of God, violate the word of God. The priests and prophets who pollute the land with their blasphemy, and lead the sheep astray.

Something that God so clearly condemns has now become twisted into something that is an expression of the dignity of God in every person, no matter what they do.

How do we come to this? The law of God has been replaced by the deception of sinful minds.

The truth, as Paul makes very clear in this verse 11 of Romans, chapter 7, is that sin perfectly deceives.

Sin deceives regarding security

- Sin deceives regarding satisfaction, safety, secrecy, and shame, and finally, regarding security.

People say and think under the deluding influence of sin, "God will let me in . . . God will overlook my sin."

In a way that is true, but it is dangerously twisted!

I had an admitted adulterer tell me a few weeks ago, "God will understand that I've got a sinful nature and we live in a fallen world . . . God understands my weakness . . . He will overlook my sin . . . He's a God of grace, so it doesn't matter."

That is true, but dangerously twisted.

It does matter. And I reminded him that sin without shame does not mean you are secure in heaven, it may very well mean you were never headed there in the first place.

Listen to the word of God from I Corinthians, chapter 6, verses 9b through 10.

. . . Do not be deceived; neither fornicators . . . nor adulterers, . . . nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.

Do these verses mean that if you have committed those sins, you cannot get into heaven?

How many of us, in this church, are sinners who sin every day in one way or another? Raise your hands. Imagine that! On the seventeenth anniversary of this church, we have taken note that it is filled with sinners.

The apostle John wrote, in I John, chapter 3, verse 9a,

No one who is born of God practices sin . . .

The key word in this verse is the verb “to practice”. It is in the perfect tense, meaning, to practice over and over and without any end.

My friend, if you practice your sin without repentance; without remorse; without guilt; without shame; without ever being able to stop, you are “exhibit A” of someone who is deceived by sin.

Sin:

- does not satisfy;
- is not safe;
- is indeed shameful;
- is never done in secret – God sees;
- does not lead to security within the kingdom of God, but to judgment and eternal hell.

Paul, in Romans, chapter 7, shares his own personal testimony of sin’s deception in his own life.

So, the functions of the law of God are that it defines sin; destroys self-righteousness; declares the deception of sin, and now, let me give two more.

The law of God delineates a holy standard

4. Number four, the law of God delineates a holy standard.

Look at verse 12.

So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

Only someone holy could conceive of holy law; only someone righteous and perfectly good could create a standard that was righteous and perfectly good. Thus, the law is a revelation of God Himself.

That is how Joshua could be challenged, in Joshua, chapter 1, verse 9, to,

. . . meditate on [the law] day and night, . . . and then you will have success.

This is why David could sing, in Psalm, chapter 119, verse 97a,

O how I love Your law!

And again, in Psalm, chapter 19, verses 7 through 10.

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.

To know the righteous, good, and holy law is to know the character of the Law-giver. To follow the Law-giver is to walk in a holy, righteous, and good path. If you abandon the law, you will be abandoned by the Law-giver.

A neighbor came to visit this week. He had a question about something else, but we turned the conversation around. They say you should never talk about religion or politics . . . what fun is that?

He shared with me how frustrated he was with his church. I will tell you only this much – he attends a mainline Protestant denomination. He said his frustration had been growing since believers in his region in New York had tried to add to the constitutional by-laws of their church, their belief that Jesus was Lord. That was it – just the simple statement, “Jesus is Lord.” They could not get enough votes, so it did not pass. Some thought it was too authoritarian – as if Jesus was not the authority. Some thought it was too divisive. Thousands of people who were part of this denomination, could not even say, “Jesus is Lord.”

They will say it one day! When every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

This Lord has given His law and it is good.

Let me give one more function of the law.

The law of God demands redemption by a Savior

5. Number five, the law of God ultimately demands redemption by a Savior.

Look at verse 13.

Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful.

The law reveals the sinfulness of sin. Notice again the last part of verse 13.

. . . so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful.

Set aside the law of God and sin no longer becomes sinful. But, accept the commandment of God and all of a sudden, you realize how utterly sinful your sin really is.

At this point, can the law help? No.

The law was not given to show you how good you have to be; it was given to show you how good you will never be.

Can a list of resolutions save you? Can a promise to never break the law again bring hope?

The law is not the cure – it is just the x-ray that reveals you are infested with sin. That is the function of the law.

You cannot be saved at Mt. Sinai, you can only be saved at Mt. Calvary. Not by good works of the law, but by the finished work of the Lamb . . . the Lamb who died for law breakers like you and like me.

At the age of thirteen, the apostle Paul had become a “bar mitzvah,” or “son of the law”. It was, according to custom, at this age, that he assumed the responsibility to keep the law.

On the road to Damascus he realized that his attempts at keeping the law were not good enough – he needed to become a follower of the Law-giver.

John wrote, in John, chapter 1, verse 12,

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become the children of God
...

He did not say, “sons and daughters of the law,” but saved ones by the blood of the Lamb.

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¹ The Raleigh World (Sept., 2003).