

Caught in the Act (Part 1)
Romans 7:7-13
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This week I read again something that I read many years ago, and perhaps many of you have read as well, a portion of the work of Augustine, the early church father, his most famous work, called Confessions. It's essentially his personal testimony written as a lengthy prayer to God as he describes how he came to faith and the work that God did through him. In his Confessions, Augustine points back to a night when he was 16 years old, when he and some of his friends were out getting into trouble, and they ended up shaking a pear tree that didn't belong to them and stealing some of its fruit.

As the mischievous deeds of youth can go it doesn't sound very bad, but this began to really bother Augustine. And what bothered him about this act was his motive because he freely confesses that he wasn't hungry; he didn't steal the pears because he was hungry. In fact, they ended up throwing them to the pigs. He writes this, "I stole something which I had in plenty and of much better quality. My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing," not the pears, "but merely the excitement of thieving and doing of what was wrong." That's very insightful.

Here, what troubled him about this seemingly, certainly sinful, but relatively trouble-free act, this act that was not going to bring the judgment of his peers upon him, was that he did it solely because he wanted to do wrong. And so, he asked himself this question, in his Confessions, was it possible to take pleasure in what was illicit for no reason other than that it was not allowed? Ask yourself that question, is it possible to take pleasure in evil solely because it's not permitted? Paul's answer in Romans 7 is absolutely yes. In fact, it is the nature of our fallenness to do so. The problem is not with God's law, he's telling us, the problem is with ourselves.

Last week, as we finished up the first paragraph of this chapter, verses 1 through 6, Paul makes, in verse 5, this remarkable assertion, you remember it, in the middle of verse 5 he says that, "the Law," God's moral law, actually "aroused" our unbelieving sinful passions. When we were unbelievers the law aroused our passions, our sin. Now, as he moves on in chapter 7 Paul is going to use his own background as a law-loving, externally law-keeping Pharisee to illustrate this simple point, not only can the law not produce obedience, it actually stirs up our desire to sin.

Now, as soon as you say that, as soon as Paul said that, he expected that to bring a question. It invites the question, is there some inherent problem with God's law if it arouses in us sinful passions? Paul's opponents could easily conclude that he was teaching that the law itself was flawed. Maybe, in fact, Paul was actually teaching people against the law. This is exactly what

the first century opponents of Christianity said. You remember what they said about Stephen in Acts 6:13, “They put forward false witnesses who said, ‘This man incessantly speaks against the law.’” That’s what they said about Paul. In Acts 25:8, “Paul said in his own defense, ‘I have committed no offense against the Law of the Jews.’” That’s what they accused him of.

So, Paul wants to make it clear, having said that the law, as we were unbelievers, the law aroused our sinful passions, Paul wants to make it clear that the problem is not with God’s law, it’s with each of us. And so, in the paragraph we come to today, Romans 7:7-13, Paul defends the law, here is his defense of the law, that’s the point of this paragraph. Here he shows us that the law, in fact, serves a critical purpose in the lives of unbelievers. It did in your life, it does in my life, and it does in the life of every unbeliever. Before we came to Christ the law had a seriously important function to play. Let’s read this paragraph together, Romans 7 beginning in verse 7 and running down through verse 13,

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. 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; for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. 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.

Now, the structure of the paragraph we’ve just read together is clear, because just like chapter 6 it’s framed around two objections that Paul anticipated and his answers to those objections. You can see objection number one is in verse 7, “What shall we say then? Is the law sin? May it never be!” And then beginning in the middle of verse 7 and running down through verse 12 you have Paul’s answer to that objection. Objection number two is in verse 13, “Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be!” We could rephrase it to make it parallel with the objection in verse 7, did the law cause my death? In verse 7, is the law sinful? In verse 13, is the law the cause of my death? And Paul’s answer comes in the second half of verse 13.

So, let’s look at this paragraph together. Responding to the first objection, Paul makes this basic point, in verses 7 through 12 he essentially says this, God’s moral law doesn’t cause your sin, God’s moral law doesn’t cause your sin. Now, he begins in verse 7 with the objection. And we

could paraphrase the objection like this, Paul, your teaching leads to the conclusion that God's law is evil and the cause of my sin. That's the objection that he wants to answer.

Notice what he says in verse 7, "What shall we say then?" This is a question that goes back to that incendiary, inflammatory statement in verse 5, the law arouses my sinful passions as an unbeliever. He says, is it legitimate to conclude that there is some inherent problem, therefore, with God's law? Verse 7 says, "What shall we say then? Is the Law sin?" Is God's moral law actually evil? Is it somehow responsible for creating and causing my sin? Paul says, "May it never be!" - this familiar phrase that expresses moral outrage. He says that is a morally repulsive idea, that God's law is somehow evil. It's never been true, never will be.

And from there he launches, in the middle of verse 7 down through verse 12, into his answer. And his answer we could summarize like this, no, the problem isn't with the law being evil, our inherent sinfulness is what causes our sin. Notice Paul's answer begins with the pronoun I. He says, "On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not know about coveting if the Law had not said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COVET.'" And then he talks in verse 8 about me and verse 9, I and I, and so forth.

Interpreters have historically understood the pronouns I and me in this passage to be referring to one of three things. You may think this is obvious, isn't it? Well, it's not always so obvious to commentators. There are three options. Some say, he's talking about Adam. In other words, he's, sort of, he's putting himself in the place of Adam and talking about Adam in the garden. Others say, no, it's Israel before Israel received the law at Mount Sinai, that's what he's talking about here. The third way this has been understood is that it's Paul's own pre-conversion autobiography. In other words, he's talking here about what happened in his heart before he came to Christ. The most common and natural way to interpret this passage is the third view, this is Paul.

But he's not simply talking about himself. He's talking about his spiritual experience, yes, but he's using it as an example of the spiritual experience of unbelievers. It's not just Paul, it's us; this happened to us. So he uses his own spiritual experience throughout this chapter as an example, in verses 7 through 13, of what is true of unbelievers, and then in verses 14 to 25 of all believers. He's using himself as an example of, first of all, unbelievers and then of believers.

So, then in verses 7 to 13, using his experience as a Pharisee before he came to Christ, Paul identifies, first of all, the real purpose of the law for unbelievers, the real purpose of the law for unbelievers. There are two of them. First of all, to identify the thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions that are sin. This is why God gave His moral law, it's to identify, to teach us what constitutes sin. Notice what he says in verse 7, "What should we say then? Is the Law sin?" Is there something wrong with the law? Is it evil? Is it the cause of my sin? "May it never be!" "On the contrary," that expression means, not only is the law not the cause of my sin, exactly the

opposite is true, “I would not have come to know sin except through the Law.” God’s law not only doesn’t cause my sin, it’s the only way I know what sin is. That’s what Paul is saying.

For the pagan who doesn’t claim to worship the true God, that person who’s disconnected from God, who doesn’t sit in an auditorium like this, who says, no, I don’t worship the God of the Bible, the law teaches him what he ought to do and what he ought not to do. Go back to Romans 1. You remember Romans 1 is about pagans, about those who don’t claim to worship the true God, who worship idols. What about them? Well, look at verse 32, “they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such sins,” as are listed in the verses above, “are worthy of death, but they not only do the same, they give hearty approval to those who practice them.”

How do pagans know what is sin? How do they know the ordinance of God? Well, you remember chapter 2 verses 14 and 15 answer that question, “For when the Gentiles,” the pagans, “who do not have the Law,” that is, the written law, “do instinctively the things that are written in the Law, these, not having the written Law, are a law to themselves, in that,” here’s the key, “they show the work of the Law written in their hearts.” Every person who’s ever lived, whether they have a copy of the Scriptures in their hands or not, have the work of the law, the substance of the law, the basic expectations of God written on the human heart and “they know.” Verse 32 of chapter 1 says, “they know,” “they know the ordinance of God.”

So, the law written on the heart tells the pagan what’s sin, he knows, but it also tells the one who claims to know the true God, and who does have the Scripture, what sin is. Look at chapter 2, you remember, here he moves on to the Jews and to anyone in the first century who claimed to know the true God, and he says in chapter 2 of Romans, verse 17, “But if you bear the name ‘Jew’ and rely upon the Law and boast in God, you know His will and you approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law.” You have come to understand both what is sinful and what God demands. Verse 21, “you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?” He says, listen, the law taught you what was wrong.

So, for pagans, the substance of the law written on their hearts teaches them what’s wrong, for people who have the written Word of God, it teaches them what’s wrong. And so, it’s true of all mankind. Go over to chapter 3 verse 19, “Now we know that whatever the Law says,” both the law in writing and the substance of the law written on the pagan’s heart, whatever it says, “it speaks to those who are under the Law,” all humanity. And what results from that? “Every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight,” now here it is, “for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.” Here’s the first purpose of God’s moral law, it identifies for us the thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions that are sin in the sight of God.

Now, go back to Romans 7. Paul is not talking here, however, about just that. In fact, he's not talking about just knowing objectively what is sin and what is not. Here in Romans 7 Paul identifies a second purpose of the law by showing us exactly how it worked out in his own life. A second purpose of God's law is to prove that I am a sinner, to prove that I am a sinner. It's one thing to know this is sin and this is not, it's another thing to come to the realization that I am a sinner, and this is what the law does. And he explains this beginning in the middle of verse 8 running down through verse 11. You see, God intends that His moral law awaken our consciences and bring us to the realization of personal guilt, in other words, conviction of sin.

Look at what he says in verse 7, "I would not have come to know sin except through the Law." Now, notice the linking word, "for," let me explain to you what I mean, he says, "for," here's an example, "I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said 'YOU SHALL NOT COVET.'" Now, where does this come from? Obviously, Paul is quoting the tenth commandment. Covet. By the way, the Greek word translated covet here is a familiar New Testament word. It's often translated lust, you shall not lust. But this command isn't just about sexual lust, this word is a general word which refers to any strong desire or craving. Sometimes it's even used positively. Jesus is described as exercising this. In Luke 22:25, I'm sorry, verse 15, Jesus says to his disciples, "I have," and He uses this word, strongly desired, "earnestly desired to celebrate this Passover with you." I craved the opportunity to celebrate this Passover with you, Jesus says. So it can be used positively, but most of the time in the New Testament it is used of desiring or craving what God has forbidden. That's how it's used here.

What's going to become clear to us as we look at verses 8 through 11 is that Paul is saying this, I would not have personally known by experience that I was guilty of coveting if the law had not said "YOU SHALL NOT COVET." In other words, he's talking about more than just an objective understanding that, yes, coveting is sin. No, he's talking about his knowing that he was guilty of coveting and that he was guilty before God. And this will become very clear, particularly next week, as we get into verses 8 through 11.

So, why did God use this commandment to show Paul that he was a sinner? How did it work that this command, of all the commands that could have been used by God in Paul's life, how did God use this command and why? Well, to understand that we really have to go back to Exodus 19 and 20 and understand the Ten Commandments in their context. I invite you to turn back there with me, Exodus 19. Now, let me give you some historical context. After the children of Israel departed from their Egyptian captivity and a journey of about three months, they arrived at the foot of Mount Sinai in the Sinai Peninsula. The first two days they were there at Mount Sinai were days of physical and spiritual preparation, but on the third day after they arrived there something really amazing took place.

The day, this third day, began with an awe inspiring display that's recorded at the end of Exodus 19, beginning in verse 16, "So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there

were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.” That’s not all, verse 18 says,

Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and [*moreover*] the whole mountain quaked violently and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, and Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder.

Can you imagine what it would have been like to have been there? There was no doubt in the two million Israelites gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai that God was there. A thick cloud, thunder and lightning, this increasing sound of a blowing trumpet, smoke like from a huge furnace, fire, an earthquake shaking the mountain violently.

Then Moses partially ascends up the mountain but God sends him back down to warn the people again not to cross the boundary or they would be struck dead. Imagine the cacophony, imagine the assault on your senses, this trumpet sound is blowing louder and louder. Don’t take this as an example, guys who play the trumpet here in our orchestra. But this was happening, can you imagine this experience?

And then, suddenly, the trumpet sound stops and everything goes silent. And out of the silence all of the people heard a great voice and it was the voice of God Himself. And God spoke audibly, with a great voice, Deuteronomy says, to all the people the Ten Commandments. Notice how chapter 20 verse 1 begins, “Then God spoke all these words, saying.” Deuteronomy 5:22, Moses recounts this same experience, and he says this to the children of Israel, ““These words,”” talking about the Ten Commandments, ““These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain from the midst of the fire, of the cloud and of the thick gloom, with a great voice, and He added no more.”” This is all God said out loud to the people. And, ““He wrote them,”” Moses goes on to say, ““on two tablets of stone and gave them to me.””

What I want you to see is that, obviously, the Ten Commandments were very important. God spoke them audibly and then He wrote them down with His own finger on two stone tablets to keep in the Ark of the Covenant in the middle of the Tabernacle and later the Temple. Why? Listen carefully, because the Ten Commandments are a summary of God’s law, a kind of outline of all that God demands. The people of that time didn’t have their own copy of the Scriptures, but God gave them a memory device, just ten Hebrew words to remember, that would encapsulate, would summarize, would outline everything that God had said.

You see, the first four of the Ten Commandments outline the commands that govern our love for God and the final six outline those commands that govern our love for our fellow man. An outline, and by outline I mean this, each one of the commandments summarizes all of God’s requirements for one aspect, one category of our lives. For example, adultery is not the only sexual sin that God forbids. So why does it appear in the Ten Commandments? It’s a

placeholder, it's a hook, to remind us that God has spoken to the sexual area of our lives. Every command God has given in the Scripture can be properly placed under one of these outline points that we call the Ten Commandments.

Let's look at them briefly together, Exodus 20:1, "Then God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'" And then He launches into these Ten Commandments. What I'm going to do is just give you a summary. I'm actually going to, since I don't have notes for you in the bulletin, I'm actually going to put them up on the PowerPoint slide and then they'll be available when this message is posted as well. You're not going to be able to write fast enough to capture them.

Number one, God says in verse 3, "'You shall have no other gods before Me.'" The essence of this command is this, we are to know and acknowledge Yahweh to be the only true God and our God. The second command comes in verse 4,

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing steadfast love to thousands," [*that is, thousands of generations,*] "to those who love Me and keep My commandments."

The point of this second command is that God must be worshiped, but He must only be worshiped in the way that He has prescribed.

The third command comes in verse 7, "'You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.'" We are to fear God and we are to treat God and everything connected with God with the greatest possible reverence and respect.

Number four comes in verse 8,

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy."

What's the point of this command? God is the Lord of our time and He demands that we devote most of our time to working and that we set aside the time He has prescribed to worship Him.

Command number five, verse 12, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you.” The point of this fifth command is that God has put others in positions of authority over us and we must honor them. Number six, verse 13. “You shall not murder.” The point of this command is more than what it immediately appears. God is the giver of life and we must respect life and we must take all reasonable steps to preserve our own lives and the lives of others.

Number seven comes in verse 14, “You shall not commit adultery.” God has given us the gift of sexuality and He demands it only be enjoyed in marriage in the way that He designed. Number eight comes in verse 15, “You shall not steal.” The point of this command is that God has distributed material wealth according to His own sovereign purposes and He demands that we respect the property of others and that we be wise stewards of our own. Number nine, verse 16, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” God demands that we maintain and promote truth in all of our communication as He Himself does.

And number ten, verse 17, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” What’s the point of the Tenth Commandment? God demands that we be content with and grateful for our condition, our life circumstances, our estate, that is, our social status and our material prosperity in this life.

Now, that is an overview of the Ten Commandments, but folks there is so much more here. How do we discover all that God intended to communicate within the Ten Commandments? Well, in His amazing providence and wisdom, God has included within the commands themselves the principles of interpretation. There are three of them. And I want you to see this because locked within the commands themselves are these three key principles of understanding and applying the Ten Commandments.

Number one, principle interpretation number one, eight of the Ten Commandments are stated in negative form, showing us that God forbids all the sinful actions in each category. What do I mean? Let’s just walk through those ten commandments again. You can look at the commands there in Exodus 20. Let me just summarize them as we’re learning here. You have broken the commands if, number one, you have loved or worshiped anything more than God. Number two, you have failed to consistently worship God from your heart, or you’ve done so in a way other than He commanded. You see, these are in negative form, these are the prohibitions.

Number three, you have broken the third command if you have taken God’s name in vain either as a curse or lightly, as in, “Oh my God,” or, if you have ever treated anything lightly that is connected to God. You have broken the fourth command if you have failed to work hard in your work or if you fail to set aside time each week to worship. Number five, you have failed to obey your parents or you have treated those in authority over you, whether it’s parents, husbands, elders, bosses, or government officials, with contempt or dishonor. Number six, you have

broken the sixth commandment if you have verbally assaulted someone, if you have been physically violent toward someone, if you have been negligent of the well-being of yourself or someone else, reckless in other words, or if you have committed murder. Number seven, you are guilty of breaking the seventh commandment if you have committed adultery or any sexual sin, period.

Number eight, you are guilty of breaking the eighth commandment if you have stolen anything from anyone, including things as intangible as time from your employer, or if you have been careless with what belongs to you, or if you are always looking for ways to take advantage of others in order to enrich yourself. Number nine, you have broken the ninth commandment if you have lied or deceived, either about yourself or about others, when it has been to your advantage to do so. And number ten, you have broken the tenth commandment if you have coveted what does not belong to you and you are consistently ungrateful and discontent, rebelling against God's providence in your life. There's the first principle of interpretation, because eight of them are negative prohibitions, clearly those sinful actions are forbidden.

Second principle of interpretation, again within the commands themselves, two of the Ten Commandments are stated in positive form, showing that God commands all the corresponding righteous actions in each category. In other words, it's not enough not to do these things. Because two of the commandments are positive and stated in positive form, it is a lesson to us that all of the others are requirements positively of us as well. Let me summarize it this way for you. Commandment number one is saying you must love God more than anything or anyone else. This is the positive side. Number two, you must truly worship God from your heart in the way that He has prescribed. Number three, you must truly respect and honor God as God and treat Him and His name and everything connected with Him with respect.

Number four, you must delight in gathering with God's people to worship Him on the Lord's Day as He has commanded us as New Testament believers. You must always rather be here than somewhere else doing something else. Number five, you must respect and honor your parents and all of those whom God has placed over you in authority in this world. Number six, you must take every reasonable step to preserve both your own life and the lives of others, no reckless behavior, nothing that puts others at danger. Number seven, you must remain sexually pure, committed sexually to your spouse alone. Number eight, you must care for your belongings and those of others as a stewardship from God Himself. Number nine, you must always tell the truth, as God does. And number ten, you must be grateful and content with the circumstances in which God has placed you in this life.

Principle of interpretation number three, the tenth commandment explicitly forbids certain thoughts. What does that teach us about how we ought to interpret the other commands? It tells us that in the other commandments, the other nine commandments, God is forbidding all sinful thinking of that kind and demanding all the corresponding righteous thinking in that category of

life. The Heidelberg catechism nails this. The question of the Heidelberg catechism is, what does the tenth commandment require of us? Here is the answer, listen to this, “That not even the slightest inclination or thought contrary to any of God’s commandments shall ever rise in our hearts, but that all times we shall hate all sin with our whole heart and delight in all righteousness.” That’s what the tenth commandment is teaching.

Now do you understand what Paul saying in Romans 7? You see how God used the tenth commandment in Paul to show him that he was a sinner? Because the tenth commandment showed him that the law was not merely about external conformity, but that it was about the heart. Now, if you understand that Paul was a Pharisee, you understand why this was so important, because this was a huge issue with the Pharisees. You remember, in fact, turn back to Matthew 5. You remember, in Matthew 5, Jesus in His famous sermon, The Sermon on the Mount, sets out to correct the Pharisees’ misunderstanding of, and wrong teaching about, the law. And He teaches them that it’s internal as well as external.

Verse 21, in fact, go back to verse 20, He said, “I say to you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” You’ve got to have more righteousness than they have because theirs is just external. And then He goes on to explain it, verse 21, “what the Pharisees teach, what the rabbis and scribes teach, is that murder, the commandment against murder is only broken if you actually murder.” In other words, what they taught was, yes, the commandment says you shall not murder, so long as you don’t murder anybody, you’re good.

Most of us here haven’t murdered anyone and so we kind of check that one, okay, never done that one. Jesus says no, no, no, you misunderstood. And notice what He says, “But I say to you,” verse 22, “that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty of breaking this command,” and He goes on to say, “if you’re angry enough to use angry words, then you’re guilty of breaking the command, of murder.” You ever done that? You ever been angry with somebody in your heart? You ever used angry words against somebody else? Jesus says, you’ve broken the command against murder. You see how it goes internal? The tenth commandment takes it internal.

Jesus goes on. Notice what He says in verse 27. Let’s take another one that most of us can check the box and say, “Yeah, never done that, I’m good.” “You have heard that it was said, “YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,”” and what the rabbis taught was that as long as you didn’t actually commit the act of adultery you were good. Jesus says no, wrong again, verse 28, “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Jesus says, okay, anybody here lusted, desired sexually, to have another person, you have broken the commandment against adultery.

The Pharisees got it all wrong, it was all external, it was all about external conformity. That’s why in Jesus’ parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee who go up to the Temple to pray, what

does the Pharisee pray? Luke 18:11-12, “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people.’” What did he mean? I don’t do what other people do, “I’m not a swindler, I’m not an adulterer, I don’t do what this tax collector does.” It was all outside, it was all external.

If you want another glimpse at how the Pharisees thought, look at Mark 10. You don’t have to turn there now, but you remember the story in Mark 10 of the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus and he says, what do I need to do to inherit eternal life? What do I have to do to gain eternal life? And Jesus says this to him, and it’s remarkable, He says, “‘You know the commandments, ‘DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, Do not defraud, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.’”” And you remember what the guy says to Him, the rich young ruler, he says, “‘Teacher, all these things I have done from my youth up.’” I’ve always kept these commandments. You say, how in the world could this guy have thought he kept all the commandments? Because they were all external. He really believed he had.

So what does Jesus do? You remember what Jesus says to this guy, He says, “‘One thing you lack; go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’” But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property.” Why did Jesus tell this guy to do this? He doesn’t tell every person who comes to Him for salvation, go sell everything you have. What was Jesus doing here? Jesus was showing this guy that he had broken the tenth commandment, he had a heart filled with covetousness. He loved his stuff more than he loved God. That was what it was about. He thought he’d kept the law because he’d kept a lot of them eternally, but it was the tenth commandment that Jesus used to lower the boom on this guy.

The apostle Paul was just like him. The Apostle Paul had this same flawed view of the law. In fact, he thought it was all external and like the rich young ruler, Paul thought he had kept them all. Turn to Philippians 3, he says this in his testimony, as he runs through, in verses 4 through 6, his spiritual assets as he saw them before his conversion. Notice what he says in verse 6, when I was an unbeliever here’s how I thought, “as to the righteousness which is in the Law, I was found blameless.” “From my youth up I’ve kept all these things.” Because he just saw them as external.

Now go back to Romans 7, now you understand what Paul was saying. Romans 7 and look at verse 7 again, “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,’” You see, when Paul really began to understand the tenth commandment, when he understood that, he suddenly realized that God cared about what was going on in his heart, that all ten commands were not just about what happened externally, his actions, but about his thoughts and his attitudes. He realized that God’s chief concern is the heart. By the way, always has been, 2 Chronicles 6:30 says, God,

You will “render to each according to all his ways,” and then listen to this, “whose heart You know for You alone know the hearts of the sons of men.” God evaluates a life based on what goes on in the heart as well as the external actions.

Proverbs 21:2, “Every man’s way is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the hearts.”
Proverbs 24:12, “If you say, ‘See, we did not know this,’ does He not consider it who weighs the hearts? And does He not know it who keeps your soul? And will He not render to man according to his work?” He’s going to look at your heart. Listen, if you die and stand before God your creator without Jesus Christ, it’s not going to just be your moral life that He looks at, it’s going to be your heart. And I promise you this, in your heart you have broken every command that God has given, and you will be guilty without hope. Jeremiah 17:10 says, “‘I, Yahweh, search the heart, and I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds.’” Listen, when God looks at the heart, nobody passes that test.

So, when Paul really came to understand the tenth commandment and he came to understand its demand for righteousness in the heart, he realized he was a sinner through and through. If you’re here this morning and you’re a Christian, what happened to Paul has happened to you. Through the work of the spirit, at some point in your life, you came to truly see your utter sinfulness before God, and you were reduced, as the first beatitude describes it, to a beggar; God, I’m just a beggar in spirit. You’re like the tax collector in the parable Jesus tells, God be merciful to me, the sinner.

Let me just say, this is an accurate test of whether or not you’re a Christian, because if you, like Paul and the rich young ruler, still think you’ve done pretty good, that you’ve kept some of God’s commands, what that really shows is you are completely clueless about God’s commands. Because the truth is, not one of us in this room has kept a single one of them. We have broken them all. This deeper, devastating understanding of God’s law is intended to drive us to Jesus Christ. Galatians 3:22 says, “Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to all who believe.” And then he says this, Galatians 3:24, I love this, “the Law has become our tutor to bring us to Christ.”

Listen, the reason God gave His law was to show you that you could never measure up to His standard; you can never earn your way into His favor. Your only hope is Jesus Christ. And the law does that. The law’s purpose in reference to justification is to be a teacher, to drive you to Jesus Christ. And let me say, that if you refuse to respond to Jesus Christ, if you refuse to respond to the gospel, God’s law leaves you under the curse of the law and without excuse on the day of judgment. The law that you know will condemn you to eternal hell.

So, every unbeliever then is still under the law. As believers, we’re not under the law, but every unbeliever is still under the law. And here’s, if you’re a unbeliever, here’s what you can do, you’ve only got three options, you can either keep it perfectly and earn eternal life, and as we’ve

seen this morning that's impossible. Or, secondly, you can fail to keep it perfectly and you can be judged and punished for every violation. Or, thirdly, you can turn in faith and repentance to Jesus Christ, admitting your own inability and clinging solely to the death of Jesus Christ, to His perfect life lived in the place of those who would believe in Him, to His death as the sacrifice for sin to satisfy the justice of God for His broken law, and find forgiveness and eternal life in Him.

My prayer is that you will opt for the third option this morning and you'll run to Jesus Christ. That's what the law does. If you've felt your conscience weighed down by the weight of the law this morning, what God intends for that to do is to drive you to Jesus Christ. Next week we'll see exactly how this process unfolded in Paul's heart and in ours. Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for Your law. Lord, it has done to us who are in Christ what it did to Paul, it has reduced us to spiritual beggars. It has shown us that we utterly lack personal righteousness. And it has, like a tutor, taught us to run to Jesus Christ. Father, I pray that You encourage us who are in Christ, remind us of what You've saved us from, fill our hearts with thanksgiving. Father, for those who are not in Christ this morning, may Your law rest heavy on their hearts, give them no real rest until they rest in Jesus Christ. In whose name we pray, amen.