

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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**Sermon Title:** "I'm the Problem"

**Sermon Text:** Romans 7:7-13

**Rom. 7:7** ¶ 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."

**Rom. 7:8** But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.

**Rom. 7:9** I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.

**Rom. 7:10** The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.

**Rom. 7:11** For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

**Rom. 7:12** So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

**Rom. 7:13** ¶ Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

**Main Point:** The law unmasks sin's power in us, preparing us to understand the battle within.

## **Outline:**

1. The Law Exposes (7:7a)
2. Sin Exploits (7:7b-11)
3. Sin Executes (7:13)

## Introduction

One of my favorite things to read is stories from history. And this past year I read a biography of *Hannibal* by Philip Freeman. I really knew nothing about Hannibal until I picked this book up. Hannibal was a general from Carthage, who was a great enemy of the Roman Republic. And Hannibal decided to take on Rome by coming in from the north and crossing the alps with his army, including his battle elephants. Just imagine crossing the alps with elephants – and Hannibal did this. And all so that he could get an advantage against Rome and choose his own battlefield.

But what made Hannibal such a formidable enemy of Rome – in fact, I would argue he was their greatest and most skilled enemy – was his knowledge of Roman tactics. The Roman Republic had the advantage of sheer numbers, but Hannibal knew Rome. He knew their methods, he knew their strategies, their pride, aggression, he knew their strengths and their mindset. And so he took advantage of this knowledge.

And so at the Battle of Cannae in southern Italy in 216 BC, Hannibal arranged his forces in a crescent-shaped line, with his weaker troops in the middle, and his strongest troops on the flanks. And so as the Romans surged forward, Hannibal's center gave way gradually, falling back but never breaking. The romans therefore thought they were winning. At the same time, Hannibal came around and attacked from behind, closing in on the Romans from all sides and surrounding the Roman army completely. This mean that the Romans were trapped, crushed, and massacred. Some ancient sources say that as many as 50-70,000 Romans were killed in a single day making it one of the worst defeats in Roman history.

Here's what I'm getting around to: Why did Hannibal win? Because he knew his enemy. He studied them. He knew their tactics. He had tangled with them before, and knew what they would do before they even acted.

In Romans 7, Paul is turning our attention to our true enemy. And our enemy is sin. It may seem strange for me to say that we should be a student of sin, but what we see here today is Paul the hamartologist – the student of sin. Paul understands and grasps sin and what it does to us. And if we know how sin operates, we will

also be ready for the inner battle that Paul is going to keep setting before us in the coming weeks.

Now, in battle, we make a big mistake if we also don't work hard to tell the difference between our friends and our foes. And particularly in today's passage, Paul is addressing people who have misdirected and think that instead of sin it's really God's law that is the enemy. They are looking at this friend of the believer and thinking it might be an enemy. And what I want us to see today is that the law is not our enemy—sin is. The law reveals, sin rebels. The law is holy, sin is hellish.

So three truths that Paul gives us today: The law exposes, sin exploits, and sin executes. It is not just that sin makes our life unpleasant or makes things difficult. Sin is actually seeking to destroy us, all the while fooling us into thinking that it is some kind of friend.

## **1. The Law Exposes (7:7a, 12)**

First, we're told that the law exposes.

In verse 7 Paul lays out his main agenda here: a defense of the law. He says,

“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.”

And then in verse 12 Paul makes crystal clear what the law is like:

“So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”

God's law is not the cause of our human predicament, nor does it make our situation worse. Instead, it exposes and reveals. The thing the law is exposing is our own sin and unbelief. It is the underlying problem of sin that contributes to the unrest Paul is talking about here. In the bigger picture, the law is a blessing. In the short-term, the law *seems* painful to us because of what it does. But we are tempted to blame the law.

[Illustration] It's sort of like the person who receives bad news. It's pretty easy for the person receiving the bad news to blame the messenger. The Roman historian Plutarch tells the story of the Roman General Lucullus, who in 69 BC was leading a campaign against King Tigranes II of Armenia. The first messenger comes running

to King Tigranes and he tells him that Lucullus is coming. Tigranes is so angry at the news that he has the messenger's head cut off.

Then Plutarch says this:

“Since the first messenger... had his head cut off for his pains, no one else would tell him anything, and so he sat in ignorance while the fires of war were already blazing around him.” (Plutarch, *Life of Lucullus*)

I do think that there are some Christians who think the law is bad because of what it says to us, and because of what sin does with it (which we'll get to in our next point). I talked about this previously. But one reason for this negative view of the law may be because the law *does* bring us bad news, and we'd rather kill the messenger than listen to what he has to say.

Many Christians are like King Tigranes, thinking that the messenger is the problem. No, the messenger is telling us the truth. The law is not lying to us, nor is it trapping us. It's reporting the truth. The enemy is in the camp. The problem is with us, not the law.

Now, there is a potentially confusing statement here in verse 9 when Paul says, “I was once alive apart from the law.” He is not saying here that apart from the law he had eternal life. He's saying that he lived in a kind of ignorant bliss of sorts. I think John Murray explains helpfully what Paul means:

“He is speaking of the unperturbed, self-complacent, self-righteous life which he once lived before the turbulent motions and conviction of sin.”

Before the law, ignorance was a kind of bliss. After all, it doesn't feel *good* to experience the conviction of sin. And kidding yourself into being blind to your own sin does give a sort of momentary bliss, which Paul seems to be saying he had apart from the law. We were dying, we just didn't know it.

I don't know if this is helpful, but I do remember what life was like before I found out how hot dogs are made. Let's just say, my family single-handedly kept the Bar-S company in existence through my childhood, and I was none the wiser.

Sometimes I wish I had not watched that YouTube documentary about hot dogs. That documentary ruined hot dogs for me. But the documentary isn't why hot dogs are made through a less than exciting process. So it is with the law.

Maybe Paul is tapping into that a bit. “I was living in bliss until the law showed me what I was blind to.” It’s pretty foolish to see the face in that mirror and blame the mirror.

The law doesn’t cause sin. It merely exposes sin.

## **2. Sin Exploits (7:7b-11)**

Second, Paul tells us that sin exploits.

I want us to read verses 7b through verse 10. Listen to the way that sin exploits here:

**Rom 7:7b** I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”

**Rom. 7:8** But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.

**Rom. 7:9** I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.

**Rom. 7:10** The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.

**Rom. 7:11** For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

I call this point “sin exploits.” And I use this word “exploits” very intentionally. Because what the sin and unbelief in our own hearts does is, it takes any good thing that it can get its hands on—in this case God’s law—and uses it as a launching pad for its own evil plans and intentions. Even something as good as the law of God... this beautiful gift of God’s grace... this amazing revelation of God’s character to us... in the hands of sin just becomes one more opportunity, as verse 8 calls it.

I want you to remember what we’re talking about here. Sin is our own inborn rebellion against God where we want and pursue forbidden things. Sin is anything in us that falls short of God’s glory. And this is something that is in the heart of every child of Adam.

The other thing to remember is what God's law is. We might think of it as a list of do's and don'ts, but it's more personal than that. Geerhardus Vos says, "The law is nothing else than God himself personally confronting the transgressor and rendering judgment" (*Grace and Glory*, 170). It's personal. It's God speaking to us and telling us what he is like, what we are like, and what the world he made is like, and showing us when we fall short of those things.

And here in Romans 7 Paul says, "God speaks to us. The pure and holy and perfect creator speaks, and the sin of our hearts goes, 'How can I twist this, confuse this, or use this?'" So we have a prior condition within our own hearts that is ready to hear or see any good thing and say, "What can I do with this besides what I'm supposed to?"

Sin deceives us. Peter Martyr Vermigli talks about how sin deceives us. Here's what he says:

"Sin deceives us [by persuading] us that the things contrary to the law are more useful, and by turning our thoughts away from the punishments the law threatens us with. It tells us to trust either that they can be avoided, or that they will not be as severe as they are proclaimed to be."

I know that might seem irrational, but we deceive ourselves, and we also just love to rebel for rebellion's sake. The snake in the garden does the exact same thing with God's command to Adam and Eve: "God said this. But did he really say?" The serpent uses what is true and turns it in another direction, finds a way to twist the good and make it crooked. He downplays the punishment, makes the fruit seem pleasant and useful.

And now we each carry our own little serpent around within our own hearts, doing the same thing that the serpent introduced. This is almost serpent-like language that Paul uses in verse 11 describing sin. Look at this again in that light: "For sin...deceived me and through it killed me." He may as well have been talking about the serpent in Genesis 3 here. But the point is, we love to twist the good into something else. That doesn't mean that the good is somehow bad.

Now we will do anything – even incredibly irrational things that don't even benefit us if we can figure out how to do it if it lets us have our autonomy and declare our

independence from God. We will do evil even when we don't have to. We'll do evil even for things we don't want or like.

[Illustration] Augustine in his *Confessions* talks about how he stole pears from his neighbor even though he didn't even like pears. And he felt so guilty, looking back, because he knew he just did it to be bad, not even to satisfy hunger. He took just because he could.

Paul is telling us that sin hijacks the law's goodness, twisting the law into an opportunity for rebellion and destruction. What was meant for life, sin turns to death. This doesn't mean that there was no sin in us until our sin met with the law.

Earlier in Romans 4:15 Paul said, "For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression." But what it means is that we were still sinners, but when sin meets the law, Paul uses the word "transgression" (*parabasis*) to describe what results.

When the law enters in, now we aren't just sinners, we're *transgressors*. This is what sin does with the law. It introduces almost this double guilt. We were already rebellious in our hearts, but now we've broken a *specific* law once we've been told about it.

It's like the bad that was already there is amplified. Now the rebellion of our hearts is even more overt and blatant. Going back to Augustine's experience with the pears again, let's think a bit more about this. There is a sort of twisted enjoyment that sin produces in our hearts when we do something that is forbidden.

Do you ever have invasive thoughts where you see a sign and go, "I'm definitely disobeying that"? Like one of those paths on a nature walk where it says, "Do not walk on the grass," and something in you sort of wants to walk on the grass? You didn't even want to walk on the grass before, but now? You definitely want to.

I promise this is true: at the Portland airport if you use the urinals in the men's room there's a big sign next to each of these urinals: "Water in urinals is non-potable. Do not drink." Listen. I promise you: before that sign was put up, zero people ever thought, "I would like to drink out of this urinal." But now? Tens of thousands of people have used those urinals already, and I am sure more than a

few of them have thought, “Well now I kind of want to drink this water.” For lots of reasons that water will probably make you wretchedly sick, yet someone at least had the impulse, “I’m going to do it.”

But why are we like that? Because every time it is us asserting our independence and saying, “No gods above, no masters below, only me.” That is the core heart commitment of sin, and it’s in every one of us. As we’ll see next week, Christ does change this in us, but it’s not fully removed or eradicated in this life. And that does mean we’ve got a battle ahead against that part of ourselves.

What I want you to see is that commandments from the law simply aren’t enough to stem the tide of sin in the human heart. The commandments won’t make us stop worshiping ourselves above all else. They just give us new ways of exalting ourselves.

And the bigger thing I want you to see is the whole reason Paul wrote this section. I want you to love, to know, and to believe that the law is good, and that the law is not the reason for our sin and misery. Our own hearts are to blame—and specifically it is the sin within our own hearts that is to blame.

### **3. Sin Executes (7:11, 13)**

Third, Paul tells us that sin executes. Sin is killing us.

I want you to see what Paul says sin is really doing in all of this. Remember: when we talk about sin, we’re really talking about ourselves and our own unbelief and rebellion. But what is sin doing in this, big picture? It’s working to put us to death.

This is where sin is always taking us. In the very first sin in Genesis 2:17 God spoke to Adam and Eve and said, “[You may not eat] of the tree of the knowledge of Good and evil...for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” From the beginning, the death sentence is announced and understood. So when the serpent is trying to get Adam and Eve to eat the fruit, what is he doing? He’s trying to kill them! He’s trying to destroy them! To destroy us!

Fundamentally, the serpent is God’s enemy, and he sees this man and woman bearing the image of God, and in them, mankind becomes another opportunity for

him to attack the creator: “his image is upon them. They have to go.” It was God’s image that made Adam and Eve targets. Satan didn’t attack cattle or animals, but he did attack the man and woman, because unique above all the creatures Adam and Eve bore God’s image and that made them a target for anyone who hated the creator.

Satan is the enemy of God, but by extension his is also the true enemy of all mankind. And when he deceived mankind, he sought to kill us. And sin does do that to us. “The wages of sin is death,” Paul has said (Rom. 6:23). And now our own sin—our own hearts—are doing the serpent’s job. Look at verse 11 again:

“Sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.” In verse 13 Paul says, “It was sin producing death in me through what is good.”

So I want you to see how different God’s plan for us is from the plan of Satan, and the impulses of our own heart. In verse 10 of our passage Paul calls the law “the commandment that promised life.” And God’s plan for mankind is life, not death.

In John 10:10 Jesus is speaking and says, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” There you see really starkly those dueling intentions.

God’s plan in Christ is life.

Satan’s plan in sin is death.

When we are tempted to sin, we usually aren’t willing to tell ourselves the truth: “This sin is suicide.” Even what we think of as the “smallest” sin is self-destruction. Even the smallest sin is us whittling away at ourselves... destroying ourselves... losing ourselves.

But we have to see our sin for what it is. I said this earlier: just as a skilled general needs to know his enemy, we also need to know sin. We need to know its strategies and attacks.

That’s what Paul is giving us here. On one level he’s defending the law and showing its goodness. And he’s saying, “don’t discard or dismiss God’s law. It’s as good as God himself.” But he’s also showing us that the solution isn’t more law. The solution isn’t, “Just do the law better.” Why can’t that be the solution?

Because every time we send the law running at our sin to attack it, sin deflects the law and uses the law to make things worse! The law tells the truth, but it's powerless to stop sin. The law remains good, but we need something more. What we need in order to destroy and defeat sin isn't the law, but the gospel.

And the remedy that God provides is in Christ, and it is the polar opposite of the evil one's plan. The evil one from the beginning has sought to steal and kill and destroy, and to corrupt what God made good. God gives us his law to reflect the life that he has for mankind. It's a picture of the good life. 1 John 5:12 gives us the good news and the remedy for the plans sin has for us: "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life."

When we get to the end of Romans 7, Paul will ask this question, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" I hope this is your question as we reach the end here: do you want to be delivered from this body of death? The answer isn't found in the law. The law tells us what is wrong with us, and it can show us what real holiness looks like, but on its own it can't provide the solution. That's why we need the gospel. Because God's answer is found in Christ. That's why at the end of this chapter Paul will say, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

And that is where he's leading us. Maybe thinking about sin is discouraging to you. But it does build our hope to know that God understands us, that he loves us, and that he has a plan for the eventual downfall of our sin, and that he has provided that answer in Christ.

*Let's pray.*