

A Right View of the Law

Living the Christian Life, Lesson 9

Living the Christian Life is a Bible study series that explores Paul's teaching about Christian growth and sanctification in Romans 6:1–8:17.

Introductory Thoughts

After a lengthy discussion of the need for and basis of justification by grace through faith in Christ (i.e., salvation or conversion), Paul now explains how this same truth should transform our mindset and lifestyle as Christians (i.e., sanctification or Christian growth). The believer's close identification with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection places him or her in a new position. He is no longer a slave to sin but serves Jesus Christ instead.

Passage: Romans 7:7-8

In English (NKJV)

- v.7 What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet."
- v.8 But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead.

Key Words and Insights

Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006) together with an interlinear Bible, like *The NKJV Greek English Interlinear New Testament* (Thomas Nelson, 1994) is an excellent way to get accurate definitions for your Bible study based upon Greek and Hebrew meanings.

Some words we have already considered from our study of Rom 6, so you can refer to those lessons or to Mounce for their definitions. As you study this passage, you should review the meanings of these words even though they are not listed on this study guide.

- *Certainly not!* (μη γενοιτο): this phrase expresses an emphatic denial or rejection and appears three times in Romans (Rom 3:31; 6:2; 7:7). A literal translation would be something like, "May it never be!"
- *Through* (διὰ): this word can be translated in a variety of ways based upon context. In this case it means something like "of immediate agency, causation, instrumentality," as in, "by means of, by."
- *Covetousness/desire* (ἐπιθυμία): an "earnest, irregular, or violent desire" or an "impure desire or lust."
- *Taking* (λαμβάνω): to "take, seize, seize upon."
- *Opportunity* (ἀφορμή): "a starting point, means to accomplish an end, occasion, opportunity."

- *Commandment* (ἐντολή): “an injunction, commandment, law, order, direction,” etc.
- *Produced* (κατεργάζομαι): “to work out, effect, produce, bring out as a result.”

Questions for Meditation and Reflection

Why does Paul ask an odd question like whether the “law is sin” (v.7)?

“What shall we say then?” is a rhetorical (or teaching) question. Paul is not actually perplexed, looking for answers. He is raising a question so that his audience will think about something important.

This question is asking something like, “Is there something wrong with the law?” or “Is the law bad somehow?” He asks this question because he pointed out in previous verses (Rom 7:5-6) that the law stimulates sinful passions and enslaves people. Since this is the case, then is the law a bad thing rather than a good one?

What reason does he use to explain why the law is *not* sin (v.7)?

The law is a good thing because it reveals to us the reality of sin. Without God’s law, we would do bad things and not even know it. As a result, we would do bad things without realizing our need for God’s help. For instance, without the 10th Commandment, “You shall not covet,” Paul would not have recognized coveting as a sin. He would have coveted without realizing he was doing anything wrong.

If the law is not a problem, then what is (v.8)?

The problem is sin itself within us. When we know that something is wrong, we have a strange tendency to *want* to do it even more than we wanted to do it before when we didn’t realize it was wrong, or we didn’t realize how really wrong it was.

What helpful function does the law serve in our lives (v.8)?

The law reveals to us what is wrong in God’s sight. According to a similar verse in Gal 3:24, the law is like a tutor who teaches, instructor, professor, guide, or coach who helps us to properly identify sin so that we can discover our need for Christ.

How does our sinful nature respond to the commands of the law (v.8)?

It produces more numerous, more frequent, and more intense desires to break the law and commit the sins that the law reveals.

Paul refers to himself frequently in this passage (“I would not have known,” “produced in me,” etc.). What is he doing when he speaks this way (vv.7-8)?

Paul is describing his own personal experience before he believed on Christ for salvation. He is also using his own experience to represent and identify with the experience that is common to us all.

Questions for Personal Application

1. What attitude should we have towards the law now that we are living under grace?
2. How should God's law continue to benefit us today?
3. What wrong tendency does a legalistic lifestyle encourage?
4. What do Paul's frequent references to himself teach us about speaking to other people about their experiences with sin?