

Indwelling Sin Weaponizes the Law

Romans 7:7-12

December 2, 2018
Steve DeWitt

Romans 6-8 are famous and wonderful chapters in Romans. The Apostle Paul spent the first five chapters explaining mankind's condition under God's wrath and salvation from that wrath by grace through faith in Jesus. Romans 6 is his defense against the claim that salvation by grace encourages sinful lifestyles. Paul is disgusted at the suggestion and explains that our union with Christ means death to sin as our master and lord. Christ is enthroned in our hearts. We are no longer slaves to sin but enabled by union with Christ and the Holy Spirit within to overcome sin. He calls this sanctification.

There was another charge against Paul that he now addresses in chapter 7. *Paul, all your talk about salvation being apart from obeying the law sounds like you're denigrating the law of Moses. God gave us the law at Mt. Sinai. Are you saying the law is evil?*

"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." But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good." (Romans 7:7-12, ESV)

Here Paul both refutes that the law is the problem and explains how indwelling sin weaponizes God's law against us.

He begins with his strong and emotional response to the suggestion that the law is sin. *"By no means!"* This is the same thing he said responding to the charge that grace is freedom to sin. He will use it again in 7:13. It is the strongest negative the Greek allows. *God forbid! No way!* He makes it clear that the law isn't the problem. Well then, where does the problem lie?

His answer? The problem lies in me. Here is the theological term—indwelling sin.

What is Indwelling Sin?

It is a summary term for biblical language like, *the old man, the flesh, and the carnal us*. Indwelling sin is the remaining enemy within us. When a sinner responds in faith to Christ, Christ dethrones sin as our master and lord. We are given a new heart, a new nature, a new law within us that loves God and treasures the purposes of God. Christ is enthroned in our hearts. The Holy Spirit indwells us, and we have new desires. Holy desires. We want to please God. We want to serve God. We want to grow in our spiritual life. All of these are good and wonderful and signs of genuine grace in our lives.

But, there remains lurking in the shadows of our inner nature, the old enemy. Still-dwelling-in-me sin. Sin is like an imbedded terrorist cell. Indwelling sin wants desperately to overthrow the new regime in our life. It hates God. It hates Christ with a fury and therefore

hates anything good God is doing in our lives. Now that we are redeemed by Christ and owned by him, our flesh hates us as well. We must realize that we all have a spiritual enemy in us. He never sleeps. He goes with us everywhere we go. He is always on DefCon 1 and ready to seize any opportunity life circumstances create to take us down.

"But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do." (Galatians 5:16-17)

There is a war going on inside us as Christians. There's no war in the non-Christian. Sin is on the throne. Sin has no rival. Sin, pride, and self-worship are the gods of the heart.

But in the Christian, Christ is on the throne. Sinful desires continue to live in us. Indwelling sin wages a guerilla war against us. If you could listen with spiritual ears to what is going on in your soul, you would hear sounds of a battle going on—automatic weapons firing, loud explosions, etc.

Continuing this theme, the goal of my sermon is to be like an air raid sounding. I'm warning you of the dangers ahead.

The most dangerous enemy is the one you don't see, don't hear, and don't even realize exists. I think many, many Christians are oblivious to this enemy. They don't understand his tactics. They don't even know there's a war going on. Like the United States at 9:00 on the morning of September 11, 2001. Our ignorance of our enemy makes us vulnerable.

Let's get into the text now.

"What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! (Romans 7:7)

Paul denies that the problem is the law. The law of God displays the character of God. God is *glorious*, so you shall have no other god before him. God is *life*, so murder is sin. God is *truth*, so all falsehood is sin and so forth. The law displays God's character. The law isn't bad. It is wonderful. Or what he says in verse 12, *"the law is...holy, righteous, and good."*

This harmonizes Romans with Old Testament passages like Psalm 119:97. The longest of all the Psalms is a loving tribute to God's law because it tells us what God is like. *"Oh how I love your law!"* Paul doesn't want anyone to think that salvation by faith apart from the law insinuates that the problem is the law of God. So, what is the problem?

"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.'" (Romans 7:7)

The only way to know something is crooked is to know what straight looks like. God's law is a moral plumb line. God's law is straight. We know what sin is because God's law tells us. That's good. Where there is no law, there is anarchy. This explains the moral anarchy of the society we live in today where everyone gets to make up their own moral rules. The inmates are running the moral asylum. What do you get when indwelling sin is ruling your life?

"Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned

you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”
(Galatians 5:19-21)

How do we know these are sin? The law of God tells us so. It is good.

I need to note something. There is a sharp debate concerning this passage and the identity of the “I” Paul is referring to. I’m not going to spend much time on this, but some people think he is describing Israel at Mt. Sinai when they got the law. Some say it is Adam in the Garden of Eden when he realized he had sinned. Some say it is Paul prior to his conversion. Having weighed these, I go with those who say the “I” here is Paul describing in a personal and universal way how sin gets a hold of him and therefore gets a hold of us too; how indwelling sin gets us to do things our spiritual selves wish we didn’t do.

What better way to disarm his critics than to say, *“The law isn’t the problem. I’m the problem.”*¹ So wonderful to hear the vulnerability of the apostle Paul’s own struggle with sin. Even as an apostle. To get to verse 24 and for him to cry out, *“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”* (Romans 7:24) It echoes 1 Timothy 1:15, *“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”*

How can Paul say he is the worst sinner? Or call himself a wretched man? Because he is more aware of his own sin than anyone else’s. You may think growing in your Christian life means seeing less sin in your life. Some people think growing means you see more sin in other people’s lives. Actually, maturing in Christ is seeing more and more of your own sinfulness. Becoming more aware of the log in your own eye than perceiving the specks in everyone else’s eyes. That’s maturity.

Romans 7 is not a rah-rah chapter. Paul ends the chapter mourning his own sin. If when we are done with the chapter you have a greater sense of your own sinfulness and the glory of God’s grace to you, then we have done our duty here.

How does our indwelling sin wage its war in us? What are his tactics? Paul explains. *“But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.”* (Romans 7:8) Wait, I thought the Tenth Commandment was *“Don’t covet,”* yet Paul says the command produced all kinds of coveting. Just to be clear, coveting is a church word for wanting what isn’t yours. It is jealously desiring what someone else has from their wife to their donkey, or in our vernacular, their BMW. The command is to be content with what God has given you and believe in God’s goodness in what he has given and what he has not given. Don’t covet. Paul says, rather than stopping me from coveting, the command created all kinds of coveting. How? Here’s the tactic.

“For apart from the law, sin lies dead.” (Romans 7:8) “Dead” here I take to mean, *dormant. Inactive. Lifeless.* When you go to a park, do you think, *I am definitely going to walk on the grass!* No. It’s not even a thought or a desire until you see what? A sign that says, *don’t walk on the grass.* Suddenly a desire rises in our hearts to do what? Walk on the grass. I so want to walk on the grass. When no one is looking, to let my shoe hang over the sidewalk edge. How does that feel? Strangely exciting. Wonderfully naughty.

“I was once alive apart from the law.” (Romans 7:9) “Alive” here is not eternal life or spiritual life, but rather, I was alive without coveting. I was at the park just fine before I saw the sign. We might say, *I was just minding my own business.*

¹ Author Unknown.

"But when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me." (Romans 7:9-11)

This is a slow-motion replay of how indwelling sin gets us to sin. We see here that sin weaponizes the law. Sin takes something good and uses it to create an alternate evil desire. The very command is weaponized to create desires to do the opposite. To weaponize something is to take something good and turn it into something bad.

Think of when man discovered fire. Fire is wonderful. On it you can cook meat. It can warm you on a cold night. But how long was it before someone used it for arson on their neighbors' house? Gunpowder was developed in China for fireworks. Yay! Everyone in China loves fireworks. Children love fireworks. Is gunpowder good? It can be. But someone realized, we can use this to blow things up and shoot projectiles and win wars.

I've been listening to the audio recording of David McCullough's wonderful book, *The Wright Brothers*. It's interesting that they had no sooner proved they could fly and the militaries of the world were offering them money for their flying machines. Why? To weaponize the good thing of aerial flight. Is flying bad? No. Like the law, it's wonderful. But like fire or gunpowder, our enemy weaponizes God's good law against us.

"But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness...For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me." (Romans 7:8, 11)

See the progression, *"produced in me all kinds of covetousness."* Desires. Unholy desires. It deceived me. Sin always involves deception. And through it, killed me. *Death*. These are the weapons of indwelling sin. Desires. Deception. Death.

"But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." (James 1:14-15)

How does indwelling sin do this? It takes the command of God and "seizes the opportunity." This is a military term in the Greek. It means to create a beachhead or stronghold from which to launch an invasion. D-Day created a foothold in Normandy from which the Allies expanded an entire invasion. That's the idea here. Indwelling sin deceives us by questioning the goodness of God or the law. It's like Satan saying to Eve, *"Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'"* (Genesis 3:1) Create a suggestion, a diversion, a little spot in the heart where Christ is not treasured. Insert self, vanity, or illicit pleasure into a hole in the defense. Now there's a foothold. A beachhead.

Paul's example is that the enemy takes the command not to covet and uses that very command to create covetous desires. How? We may call this human nature, but we really should call it sin nature. The nature of pride is to recoil against anyone telling us what to do. We want to be the gods of our lives. Free. Independent.

This is easy to see in children. How do children respond to the law of Mom and Dad? We say, *It's time to go to bed*. Up to that point, there may be little interest in snuggling or picking up the toys. The moment I say, *it's time to go to bed*, it's incredible the delay tactics they employ. *Daddy, let's snuggle. Daddy, can I scratch your back? Daddy, let's do family devotions*. All negotiations that rival US trade agreements. They lawyer up as well. *But my sister isn't helping me put the toys away. It's not fair because my friends at school get to*

stay up later than me. On and on it goes, simply because I put forth a law, *It's time to go to bed.*

But are we all so different? How do we respond at work to be being told to do something? Or to a new policy? The other day a delivery company vehicle raced through our neighborhood. I was outside, and my daughters were playing in the driveway. I wasn't happy. I stood in the middle of the road as he came back through. I said, *"I've got daughters playing here in the driveway, could you slow down?"* Did he like that? No. He gunned the engine and drove away at warp 1.

I remember a sermon illustration from my childhood pastor on this point. He told about going to a hotel with a high overlook balcony. When they first got there, he noticed a sign that said, *no fishing from the balcony.* No sane fisherman would ever fish from this balcony. He asked the front desk about it and they said, *"Nobody ever fished from there until we put the sign up."* What's the best way to get kids to skateboard in front of your business? Put up a *No skateboarding* sign. Now every skateboarder in town wants desperately to skateboard right there.

Think of a sin you struggle with. You know it's not God's will. You know it's wrong. For some reason up to this point, you want to do the wrong thing more than you want to do the right thing. Why? Desires. Deception. Death. Your enemy within wants to take you down. Scripture says sin is pleasurable for a season. Stolen waters are sweet. There's something exciting about sinning. The forbidden fruit strangely appeals to us. This whole chapter explains why.

So, a Christian is a divided individual. There's no war within the non-Christian. But the moment you become a Christian, now the battle ensues. Now the strongest temptations come and the war within begins. Why? We are justified. Redeemed. In union with Christ. But we are still fleshly. We remain in bodies that are not yet glorified, and all the seeds of sin remain in our hearts. Is the law the problem? No. I'm the problem. Understanding this is the first step to overcoming sin in our lives.

In a quick glance ahead to next week's passage, listen to the apostle Paul describe it. Does this sound familiar?

"For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing...Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:15, 19, 24-25)

Why do I keep sinning? In church I don't want to sin, but then I go to work or get with my friends or I'm alone with my computer AND what? I do what I don't want to do. We will get into this next week.

But see that he ends with where all our hope in this battle must go. *"Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"* As long as I am in this body, I'm in a moral war. There is no perfection in this life. It's a constant struggle with the world, the flesh, and the devil. There is growth and there is freedom and there are incremental victories and there is sanctification. But our ultimate victory over every garrison of sin in our lives is when this body dies and with it all its hate and all its pride and all its self-worship. For the Christian, death is freedom forever from sin. Forever we never sin again. The war is over. Christ has won. And in his victory, we win too.

But for now, we fight, and the enemy is ever with us and today we learned a little about his tactics. Much more on how to wage a counter-insurgency next week.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Permanent Text Edition® (2016)*.
Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

© 2018 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.