

Pentecost 5 / July 2, 2023

Romans 7:7

“If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.”

What motivates you? One of the greatest motivators is being told “no.” When somewhere is out of bounds, people immediately want to go there. When something is forbidden, it takes on a mystique and people want it. A person told me that during childhood, he and his friends would sneak into a neighbour’s yard and steal apples from his tree. People do things like that. But, I wondered why he did that, since there were apple trees in his own yard. He said, “It was more fun to steal them.”

Sometimes we desire things that are forbidden. Sometimes we desire things, because they are forbidden. There is no thrill like the thrill of doing something we are not supposed to do, unless we get caught. With that in mind, some people use reverse psychology to motivate people, getting them to do what they want by telling them to do the opposite. Sometimes it works, because we don’t like being told what to do. Do you like being told what to do?

Why is forbidden fruit so alluring? Eve and Adam were given permission to eat from every tree in the garden, except one. That’s the one they wanted! Even in a state of perfect righteousness before the advent of sin, they were tempted to eat the forbidden fruit. The sweetest fruit is the forbidden fruit! If what was forbidden was so alluring to them before sin, how much more tempting will the forbidden fruit be to us, who are now by nature sinful?

The desire for what is forbidden reveals the presence of sin in our hearts. One of the primary functions of God’s holy law is to make sin known in our hearts. Paul writes, “While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.” Sinful passions slumbering in our hearts are awakened by the law forbidding them. The purpose of the law is not to incite us to sin, but to make us aware of our sin, so we would see our need for God’s help and receive the gift of His mercy in Christ our Saviour. Christ sets us free from slavery to sin and lifts from our heads the condemnation of eternal death. The bitter fruit of sin is death. The gracious gift of God is forgiveness and eternal in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul writes, “If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.” It is good to know sin, to be aware of our sinful nature and the bitter fruit it bears. It’s important to be aware of our proclivity to sin, in what we do and don’t do, in what we say and don’t say. It is good to be aware of our sinfulness, so we avoid temptation. It is most important to know our sin, so we see our need for God to be our Saviour. The greatest blessing in seeing our sinfulness, confessing our sins is receiving the treasure of forgiveness God gives us in Christ Jesus. Our resistance to God’s holy law and desire for what is forbidden, serves a good purpose in that through it, the Holy Spirit continuously returns us to Jesus and the forgiveness and help promised in our baptism.

The law shows us our sin, so we always appreciate God’s grace in Christ Jesus. We truly appreciate Christ our Saviour, when we appreciate our sinfulness and need for His salvation. The law shows us our constant need for Jesus as our helper and Saviour. We need laws to govern our society and make boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. We need God’s law to guide us in living righteous lives that are pleasing in His sight. We need God’s law first and foremost to show us our need for Him to be our Saviour, so that through the gospel of forgiveness, we would be led to Jesus and the cross upon which He died for our pardon and sanctification.

We need laws, because we don’t naturally know what is good in our relationship with God, or in our relationships with other people. Governments continuously make new laws and seek different ways to regulate human behaviour, so societies can provide the maximum benefit to their members. At one time it probably wasn’t illegal to drive past a school at high speeds. It wasn’t illegal, but it wasn’t safe either. Eventually governments created speed zones around schools. Driving fast past schools wasn’t against the law when there was no law, but it was dangerous nonetheless to children attempting to cross the street to enter the school. The law identifies problems and seeks ways to deal with them.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul deals with the relationship between sin, law and God’s grace. The law identifies sin. Sin was in the world long before it was identified by the law. The law Paul speaks of is the written code, delivered to Israel by God through Moses. Sin was in the world long before God gave the law through Moses. Human sin came through the disobedience of Adam and is passed on to all people descended from him. God’s law is written on the human heart as an act of creation. Even before the written code, people had a general sense of right and wrong, their consciences sometimes accusing and other times excusing them. But the law of

conscience is open to individual interpretation and varies from person to person. Some people seem to have no conscience. But even people with no conscience show they know the difference between wrong and right, because they do their best not to get caught.

God's law does not create sin. God's Law show the presence of sin. The law in our hearts and in the written code of commandments given through Moses are good and holy. The law is an expression of God's holiness. It does not cause us to do evil. The evil in us uses the law to incite our hearts to sin. The person who stole apples, knew it was wrong to steal. It made him mad when the neighbourhood kids stole from his apple tree. He didn't steal from necessity. There were apples in his parent's yard. He knew that if he had asked, the neighbour would have said to help himself to his apples. He stole, because it was exciting. Sin is more exciting when its against the law.

The law is not the problem. Our sinful nature makes sin exciting. The law forbidding sins stirs up sinful passions in our hearts, but it is our sinful nature that is the problem. Sin may be made more exciting by the commandment forbidding it, but the bitter fruit of sin is death. We use the law properly when we use it to see our sin and know our need for God's forgiveness. Thanks be to God for His law that reveals our sin and its consequences. Thanks be to God for His gospel, by which He frees us from the control of sin and empowers us to bear the good fruit of righteousness, by living according to His righteousness in Christ Jesus.

Forbidden fruit may be sweet at first taste, but it leaves a bitter aftertaste. Pain and death in time. Spiritual and physical death to God in eternity. Consider the effects of sin on Adam and Eve's relationship with each other, creation and with God. He blamed her for his sin. He blamed God for giving her to him. Instead of being equal partners, he would now lord it over her. The creatures that shared the earth with them in peace, would now flee from them in fear. They once walked with God in the garden, now they hid from His presence. They would die in their bodies. All of their descendants would die physically, many eternally, soul and body. Consider the effects of sin in our lives.

The most bitter fruit of sin is death. Death comes to all people, for all sin and fall short of the glory of God. The law shows us our sin. The law opens our eyes to our need for God to be our helper and Saviour, so that in the gospel, we would see Jesus and in Him receive forgiveness of our sin, release from sin's control and eternal life in God's presence in His resurrection. The bitter fruit of sin is death. The gracious gift of God is forgiveness and eternal in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God bless us to see our sin in the mirror of the law, so that in the gospel we may behold the face of Jesus our Saviour and be empowered to walk in His light. In Jesus' Name. Amen