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Class Notes

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The Terrible Power of Sin

Romans 7:12-25

In the year 1665, the Black Death, the bubonic plague, came to London. Now earlier in history, in the 14th century, the Black Death had swept through the entire continent of Europe, wiping out whole villages. It left a legacy of terror unlike anything that had happened up till that time.

That terror returned to London in the year 1665, and there seemed to be scarcely a house without someone dead. Death was everywhere. And the connection between sin and death was never more obvious as the people recognized and realized that it was through the sin of one man that death entered the world and they felt the tyranny, the power of sin and death, the reign of sin and death as it were. As Christians, we know from Romans 5, that just as sin reigned in death, so also, grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord. And so we have this seemingly unbreakable reign of sin and death, this unbeatable foe of death. And the only thing stronger is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There was a puritan pastor who lived at that time named Ralph Venning, and he wrote a book shortly thereafter in 1669 entitled *The Plague of Plagues*. What is the true plague that troubles the human race? It is not disease, it is not the bubonic plague, the Black Death; it is in fact SIN. And that's what this book was about, the "plague of plagues" is sin. And he took as his starting point for his meditation, Romans 7:13: "*Did that which is good*" [namely the holy, righteous, and good law of God] *become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good so that through the commandment, sin might become utterly sinful.*" That sin might become

utterly sinful, that we might actually see sin for what it really is. And that's what Ralph Venning sought to do, and he made seven major observations:

- 1) The law of God as a whole is good in each of its parts. The law is good, A to Z.
- 2) This good law, when transgressed, hands a man over to death.
- 3) Though the law condemns man's fault and man for his fault, yet the law is still good and not to be blamed. It's not the law's fault, there's nothing wrong with the law.
- 4) It is not the law, therefore, but sin itself, that works man's death and ruin.
- 5) Sin works man's death and destruction by that which is good, by that which is good and holy and righteous, namely the law.
- 6) Therefore, sin is exceedingly wicked and detestable.

[This is what Ralph Venning said, "Sin is most immeasurably spiteful, poisonous and pernicious, because it kills men and not only so, but it kills them by that which is good and what was appointed to man for life. Therefore it turns food into poison."]

- 7) By the commandments, sin appears to be (is revealed to be) excessively sinful.

Venning: "If we look on this through the microscope glass of the law, take sin and put it under the microscope and look at it. It will appear a most hideous devilish and hellish thing. The most wicked mischievous villainous and deadly thing that ever was, sinful sin, worse than the devil."

Why is sin "worse than the devil?" Why is sin so wicked? It is contrary to the very nature of God and is also contrary to the individual attributes of God.

Sin is Contrary to the Nature of God:

1 John 1:5 God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

Habakkuk 1:13 Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.

Sin is Contrary to the Attributes of God: Sin deposes God's **sovereignty**. It says with Pharaoh, "Who is the Lord that I should obey him?" It makes us the king or queen. Sin denies God's **all-sufficiency**. Why did the prodigal son leave home? Because there wasn't enough in his father's home to keep him there. He wasn't satisfied. He had to roam, he had to wander. He wanted something other than

the will of God for him. Sin defies God's **justice**. Either it says on the one hand God is unjust for bringing his condemnation on us or unjust for writing the law, or on the other side, it says God has no justice and will not act against sin. It disowns God's **omniscience**. It says, "Does God really see what I do in darkness? What I do alone? Could it be he doesn't know?" And it despises the riches of God's **goodness** and **patience**, not realizing that the riches of God's goodness, kindness, tolerance, and patience are to lead us to repentance. Instead we presume on God's goodness and patience day after day after day. And it defiles God's **grace** by turning the beautiful grace of God into a license for immorality and for sin. This is the wickedness of sin.

Sin is Contrary to the Plan of God: Sin is like friction, which opposes motion in any direction. Whatever motion, whatever direction God wants to move, sin stands to oppose and resist the plan of God.

Romans 8:7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.

Sin is Contrary to Humanity: Sin is also contrary to man. God is the highest good of man. God is delightful to us, at least he should be. Ps. 73: "*Whom have I in Heaven, but You God? And Earth has nothing I desire besides You.*" I need nothing else. Sin separates us from the very thing that is our highest good, mainly God, and therefore, sin is contrary to man as well.

Sin is therefore the ultimate enemy of everything that you hold dear and precious. There is not a day that goes by that we do not feel the sting of its whip, like a scorpion across our back. Every little Eden that God has ever created, sin has crept in to ruin it to some degree. From the original Eden to the Eden of a family, a husband and wife, or of a church, or of a nation. Every good thing that comes, sin creeps in to pollute and to defile. Sin brought the worldwide flood. Sin built the tower of Babel. It was sin that enticed Solomon to turn his back against God. It was sin that brought down the temple that he built. Sin has resisted and destroyed every good thing in this world, except for the blessings of the Gospel.

Like... the Promised Land:

Ezekiel 20:6 On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of Egypt into a land I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most beautiful of all lands.

Ezekiel 33:29 Then they will know that I am the LORD, when I have made the land a desolate waste because of all the detestable things they have done.

So... Romans 7 is written to show us just how EVIL and POWERFUL sin really is; a force so great, we could never defeat it without the power of God working in us by the gospel.

Romans 7: The Law Cannot Sanctify

The topic of the whole chapter: the Christian's relationship with the Law

It is as impossible to be sanctified by Law as it was to be justified by Law.

Romans 3:20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight

Romans 7 says, "By works of the law, no human being will be sanctified in his sight!"

Three-Part Outline of Romans 7

- 1) Romans 7:1-6 Dead to the Law, Married to Christ, Bearing Fruit for God

Romans 7:4 Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.

- 2) Romans 7:7-12 Vindication of the Law

[There is nothing wrong with the Law; that's not why we do not bear fruit for God. The problem is with US]

- 3) Romans 7:13-25 Paul's Experience With Indwelling Sin: Proof That Law Cannot Sanctify a Christian

A. Romans 7:1-6 Dead to the Law, Fruitful for God

Romans 7:1-6 Do you not know, brothers-- for I am speaking to men who know the law-- that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? ² For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. ³ So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man. ⁴ So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. ⁵ For when we were controlled by the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶ But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

B. Romans 7:7-12: The Holy, Perfect, Spiritual Law Actually Kills Us

Romans 7:7-12 *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." ⁸ But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin is dead. ⁹ I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. ¹⁰ The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. ¹¹ For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. ¹² So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.*

Paragraph overview:

Paul vindicates the law here because it might be thought that he has been insulting the law or in some way dragging it down. Paul is strongly asserting here that the law has an indispensable role in our salvation... especially by showing us 1) what sin is and 2) that sin is clearly in us... we are guilty of transgression; 3) preparing us to seek the salvation that Christ alone can give.

Paul gives an example of how the law teaches what sin is in the case of coveting. The tenth commandment is quoted here: "You shall not covet." Paul is speaking of his personal experience with this commandment saying that, as a boy, when he first learned the commandment's words, he did not know what coveting was. More deeply, it was only by the law that he saw coveting in his heart and in his life.

But he goes deeper. He shows that sin is exceptionally evil, for it actually used the commandment to produce sin in his life. Once he learned what coveting was from the verbiage of the commandment, he soon found all manners of coveting were springing up in his heart that had never been there before. Sin used the occasion of learning the commandment to deceive him and cause him to sin.

He speaks of sin deceiving him and putting him to death. He said he used to be alive apart from the commandment. This means unaware, innocent, probably as a child. Thinking he was fine. Or maybe like the rich, young ruler:

Matthew 19:16-20 *Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" ¹⁷ "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments." ¹⁸ "Which ones?" the man inquired. Jesus replied, "'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, ¹⁹ honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'" ²⁰ "All these I have kept." the young man said. "What do I still lack?"*

Or like Paul before his conversion:

Philippians 3:3-9 we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh--⁴ though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith

But when the commandment “came” Paul says “sin sprang to life and I died.” What is the nature of that death? I think it is spiritual death:

Genesis 2:17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.

Ephesians 2:1-2 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,² in which you used to live

Paul MARVELS over the great wickedness of sin, that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually produced death. How? By sins seizing the opportunity of the commandment:

Romans 7:8 But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire.

Romans 7:11 For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.

Sin is portrayed as a rapacious, deceptive highway assassin of souls. The law is vindicated as good... sin is exposed as truly evil:

Romans 7:12-13 So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.¹³ Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

Sin is portrayed as UTTERLY SINFUL... or “sinful beyond measure”; actually Paul says that “through what was good” (actually, “holy, righteous, and good”) sin BECOMES sinful beyond measure. What does “becomes” mean? Well, just that it is REVEALED according to its true nature.

Much of this chapter is designed to help us realize how evil and powerful and intractable sin really is. Sin is portrayed by Paul in light of the law and his own

personal struggles with sin as a very powerful, evil, deceptive, murderous, relentless enemy... the second greatest power in human experience. The power of sin is so great that only the grace of God in the gospel of Christ is more powerful.

C. Romans 7:13-25 The Relentless Struggle with Indwelling Sin.

Romans 7:13-25 Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful. ¹⁴ We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. ¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do-- this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. ²¹ So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God-- through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

- 1) Challenging Questions: is Paul speaking for himself? Is Paul speaking as a regenerated believer or not?
 - a. Evidence on the one side (Paul is speaking as an unregenerate person would)

Romans 7:14 We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.

How could a Christian say that? Especially given these verses:

Romans 6:14 For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

Romans 6:17-18 But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. ¹⁸ You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

- b. Evidence on the other side (Paul is speaking as a regenerate person)
 - i. Paul's genuine delight in the law

Romans 7:22 *For in my inner being I delight in God's law*

How could a non-Christian say that, especially because (as we saw above) the mind of the flesh is hostile to God:

Romans 8:7 *For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.*

ii. Paul's adjustments of his statements

Romans 7:18 *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh.*

Romans 7:25 *I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the flesh a slave to the law of sin.*

iii. Paul's decisive break with sin shown by "no longer I"

Romans 7:17 *As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.*

Romans 7:20 *Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*

That implies a massive change, which can only be explained by being born again in Christ.

2) Three Cycles of Lamentation

a. They all follow the same pattern: Condition... Conflict... Cause

First, Paul describes his condition. Secondly, he describes the resulting conflict because of that condition. And third, he gets to the root cause. What is the condition? He's mixed. He's both spiritual and he is fleshly, flesh-like. He's mixed. Secondly, conflict is proof of this condition. There's a struggle between what he wants and what he doesn't want. What he loves and what he hates. There's a battle going on. And the root cause is sin in his members, sin in the flesh.

b. Cycle #1, verses 14-17

Condition (vs. 14): *"I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin."*

Conflict (vss. 15-16): *"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do."* [BTW: Sins of both omission and commission]

Cause: (vs. 17): *"As it is, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it."*

c. Cycle #2, verses 18-20

Condition (vs. 18): "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh."

Conflict (vss. 18-19): "*For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do, this I keep on doing.*"

Cause (vs. 20): "*Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*"

d. Cycle #3, verses 21-23

Condition (vs. 21): "*So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.*"

Conflict (vss. 22-23): "*For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner...*"

Cause (vs. 23): "...*another law at work in the members of my body...*" "...*the law of sin at work in my members*"

3) The Cry for Deliverance and Its Answer

Romans 7:24-25 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God-- through Jesus Christ our Lord!

4) The Final Lament:

Romans 7:25 So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the flesh a slave to the law of sin.

NOTE: The Holy Spirit is never mentioned here at all! That is the key... this is the experience of any genuine Christian who is tempted and attempts to address it by the law alone without using the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is how every Christian sins.