

# LAW, DEATH, AND FREEDOM

Romans 7:1-13

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8; Series A)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The epistle lesson comes from *Paul's letter to the Romans*, chapter 7, verses 1 through 13. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Romans 7, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? <sup>2</sup> For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. <sup>3</sup> Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> For 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. <sup>6</sup> But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

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

<sup>13</sup> 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.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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The word of the day is "law."

What comes to your mind when you hear the word "law?"

Perhaps you think of the speed limit or taxes. Maybe it's laws about theft or murder. We have laws to govern the behavior of individuals. And you might like these laws, or you might not. I don't know. You might see them as either a protection of your life and property, or as an invasion of your individual liberty. Maybe you say, "I fought the law, and the law won." It usually does.

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But that's not the only thing we might think of when we hear the word "law." You might think of the laws of nature, like the law of gravity, the laws of motion, or the laws of thermodynamics.

Or, if you're thinking in theological terms, which is a normal thing to do when you're sitting in church, you might think of God's Law, like the Ten Commandments.

There are a number of different things we might think of when we hear the word "law." And these might all seem like different things, but they're not. These are all a part of God's Law.

God's Law, very broadly speaking, is simply his will for how his creation should function. It's the moral, and physical, and chemical structure for how the universe is supposed to work.

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We talked a little about this a few weeks ago, when we considered the creation account in Genesis 1. When God created the everything, he didn't merely create the material of the universe, but he also created the laws that govern how the everything should function. We see this at the very beginning of the Bible: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void" (1:1-2). Or another translation is just a little bit simpler: "formless and empty" (NIV). "Formless" means "without structure." And "empty" means there just wasn't anything there. So God, when he created, did not merely create the material of the universe, but he also created the structure, or form, of the universe. He created the laws of nature, which governs the way stuff works. It wasn't like God created all the stuff, and then it just functioned according to laws that already existed. There were no laws. So God created the structure for all the stuff. He also created animal instincts to govern the way animals behave. And he created the moral law to govern the way humans behave. All of this is God's will for how his creation should function, and it all fits into the broad category of law. It's the form of the universe.

So one way to define virtue, and I think this is helpful, is simply "functioning according to God's design for creation." So when husband and wife love and honor each other, that's the way God designed marriage to function, and it's virtuous. Children honoring their parents is virtuous. We calling upon God in every time of need is virtuous, because that's how God created us to function. We could even say that when birds fly south and bears hibernate for the winter, they're being virtuous. When bees sting you in order to protect their hive, they're being virtuous, because that's how God created them to function. Even if I ... let go of a glass, and it falls to the floor and shatters, it is being virtuous. That's not good, and I might not be virtuous in that moment, because I'm not supposed to drop the glass. But when the glass falls and breaks, it is functioning exactly how God designed it and the world to function. It is behaving according to the will of God, which he hardcoded into the universe as his Law.

Thinking of the Law this way is very helpful, because it helps us recognize that the law is objective. I was quite pleased that Stephen talked about this a little bit last week when he filled in. The point is that the Law does not change. We don't get to decide what is or is not a law. Violating a commandment, any commandment, is no safer than trying to violate the law of gravity. When we do not function according to God's design for the universe, we break ourselves, and we break people or things around us. One of my professors in seminary stated it very well. Dr. Blosser said, "We don't break God's Law; we break ourselves against God's Law." God's Law is objective. God authored it a certain way, it still is the way God authored it, and we don't get to change it.

We sometimes live with the delusion that we can. In a "government of the people, by the people, for the people" (Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address"), we have some say as to what the laws

of our land will be. And this is probably good, but it can give us the delusion that we actually have freedom to determine what is or is not law. We might be tempted to think of law more along the lines of community standards, that is, a code of conduct that we all agree on. And if we want to change it all, we think that's okay. In this way of thinking, the authority to determine law belongs to the persons writing or voting on the laws. Of course, this temptation exists in any system of government. Those in authority will be tempted to think they are the source of the law. But this is not true. This is not true anywhere. And it only leads to death.

The responsibility of government is not to create law, but to recognize those laws that already exist in nature. The founders of the United States showed at least some understanding of this when, in the Declaration of Independence, they appealed to "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God." And they went on to say, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men ..." There is obviously much more to their philosophy, including the consent of the governed. But they recognized that the purpose of government, and especially the government they were forming, was not the highest authority. The purpose of government is to recognize the laws God has authored, the laws that already exist, and then to enforce those laws.

And this does not make the United States a Christian nation. It is not now, and it never has been. If, by "Christian," we simply mean that 51% of people would check "Christian" on a survey, maybe. But the Apostles' Creed is not enshrined in the Constitution, nor does it say anything of Jesus Christ. And that's okay. The purpose of government is not to evangelize. The purpose of government is to recognize those laws that God has authored in nature and uphold them.

Most governments do this without any clue of who the true God is. We see this in the general consensus of laws across time and geography. Every government recognizes and upholds at least parts of the Fourth through Eighth Commandments. The first three commandments have to do with worship of God, and the last two have to do with coveting. Governments don't often venture into those territories, but four through eight are almost universally recognized.

The Fourth Commandment, "Honor your father and mother," is recognized when governments protect the hierarchical relationship between parents and children.

They recognize and uphold the Fifth Commandment, "You shall not murder," not only when they make laws against murder, but also when they prohibit any kind of physical assault.

The Sixth Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery," is not as widely applied today as it used to be, but it's still applied to things like sexual assault and pedophilia.

The Seventh Commandment, "You shall not steal," might be the most clearly applied commandment.

And even the Eighth Commandment, "You shall not bear false witness," is recognized, at least in part, all over the world. There are penalties for giving false statements, especially in a court of law. And slander and libel are often punishable.

We might not always think that our government is not doing a good job recognizing and enforcing these laws. And there is a legitimate debate to be had regarding to what extent it is prudent for a government to enforce the moral law. But that's not really my point. The point is not to teach a political philosophy, although Christians should understand why God instituted government. The simple point I'm trying to make today is that God's Law is objective. Across time and geography, and even in tyrannical governments, you will find some recognition of God's commandments. That is because God's Law is objective, and he hardcoded it into the

universe. There is a moral form to the universe, just like there is a physical form to it. All of this comes from God.

And this is good. Besides recognizing the objectivity of God's Law, we should also recognize its goodness. The Law comes from God. He is the source. It is his will for how his creation should function. And God's will is always good.

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In Romans 7, the apostle Paul wrestles with the dilemma of why the Law is good, but yet there are so many negative consequences attached to it. Why, if the Law is good, does it seem so bad to us sometimes? Why does it hurt us? Why does it cut us to our hearts? Why does it cause despair? Why does it incite rebellion in us?

The problem is not the Law, but sin. And I especially mean the sinful nature. We sometimes think too narrowly about sin. Sin is not merely the bad stuff we do. Sin, before all of those things, is our condition of being born "without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with the inclination to sin" (*Augsburg Confession*, "Article II: Original Sin"). That is, we naturally do not have faith in God, and we do not like the things he has commanded of us. We desire darkness more than light. So our wills are contrary to the good will of God revealed in his Law.

Paul recounts his experience of not knowing the Law. And before he knew the Law, he was alive, or at least he thought he was. But when the Law became known to him, it killed him. And I think we've all experienced something like this.

The Law promises life to us. In the Old Testament, God promised the Israelites, that if they kept his laws, they would have a long and peaceful existence in the land he was giving them (Deut. 4:1; 6:1-3). In the gospels, Jesus even promises that if we keep God's commandments, we will inherit eternal life (Luke 10:25-28). That's the way the Law works. If you obey it, you will be rewarded. If you disobey it, you will be condemned. We all feel this to be true. So the Law promises life to us ... if we keep it. But it proves to be death to us, because we do not keep it. Our very nature is bent on not keeping it.

So we often have an experience like Paul's. We first become aware of the Law, and we think to ourselves, *I can do that*. But then we don't. And then we think, *Maybe if I just try harder*. So we try harder and it doesn't work. C.S. Lewis wisely wrote, "No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good" (*Mere Christianity*, Book III, chapter 11, p. 142). That's when we realize that our problem is not our actions. Our problem is who we are. So the Law brings death to us.

The Law even incites rebellion in us. Paul uses coveting as an example. He would not have even know what it is to covet, if not for the commandment (7:7). But as soon as he heard the commandment, all kinds of covetousness came to life (7:8). He was probably already coveting without knowing it was wrong. But as soon as he started to think about coveting, he also started to see more and more things other people had that he didn't. I mean, if I say to you, "Don't worry about what other people have," what do you immediately think of? All the stuff that other people have! The commandment is good, but it actually leads to more sin. This shows the deep depravity of our inborn sinfulness. As soon as God tells us what not to do, we start to question why he would say such a thing. Instead of trusting him, we are naturally skeptical of him. We suspect that he imposes these commandments in order to keep us from having a good time. That is the nature of sin. So God's Law, despite being good, incites rebellion in us. Sin comes to life, and it proves to be death to us (7:11).

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So sin leads to death. Therefore, God uses death to be the end of the Law, or at least the end of the Law's condemnation upon us. God has created a way for us to die to the Law without actually ending our lives. In fact, he has created a death that brings us to life like we have never been alive before. Paul has talked about it already in Romans. If you peek back at chapter 6, you will see that this special kind of death is called "Baptism."

When you were baptized, you were baptized into Jesus Christ. And being baptized into Jesus Christ especially means that we are baptized into his death and resurrection. Baptism does not work apart from Jesus. That's one of the worst myths about Baptism. It does not save apart from Christ. Instead, it saves because it unites us with Jesus in his death and resurrection. His death becomes our death, and his life becomes our life.

If we were to just die by ourselves, we would stay dead, because we are transgressors of the Law. Death has a right to take us. But death did not have a right to take Jesus, because he never transgressed the Law. Therefore, when he willingly went into death, it could not hold him, and he rose from the dead on the third day. So if we are united with him in his death, then we are also united with him in his resurrection. This means that we have new life now, so that, even though sin still lives in us, faith and righteousness also come to life in us. We have new life now. And it also means that we will be raised with Christ at his return. And we will live forever in spiritual and bodily perfection.

This is the gift of God to you. And he delivered this life to you by Baptism. So do not despise your Baptism nor take it for granted. Cherish it and live in it as a child of God. That means confessing our sins, receiving forgiveness, and walking in newness of life.

Find your hope in Jesus, because in Baptism you were joined to him. Do not trust in yourself. Do not trust in your own efforts to keep the Law. Because we have violated the Law, and the end of that is death. But trust in the one who kept the Law. Trust in the sinless Son of God who gave himself into death in your place. Find your hope in his death, because his death leads to freedom and life. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.